

# LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET.

BY

M. E. BRADDON.

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IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

LEIPZIG

BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

1862.

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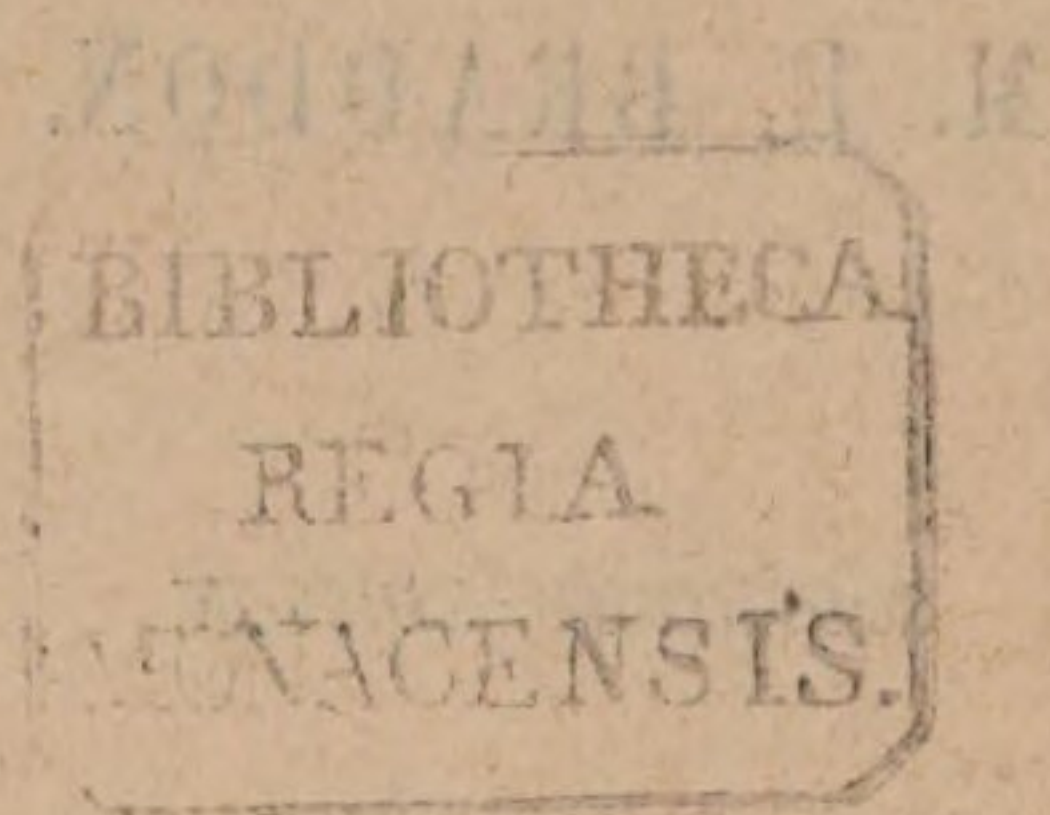
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LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET



IN THE ZOOLOGICAL MUSEUM

OF THE

BRITISH MUSEUM

DEPARTMENT OF ZOOLOGY

1881

THE ZOOLOGICAL MUSEUM



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# LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET.

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## CHAPTER I.

So Far and no Farther.

ROBERT left Audley the next morning by an early train, and reached Shoreditch a little after nine o'clock. He did not return to his chambers, but called a cab and drove straight to Crescent Villas, West Brompton. He knew that he should fail in finding the lady he went to seek at this address, as his uncle had failed a few months before, but he thought it possible to obtain some clue to the schoolmistress's new residence, in spite of Sir Michael's ill-success.

"Mrs. Vincent was in a dying state, according to the telegraphic message," Robert thought. "If I do find her, I shall at least succeed in discovering whether that message was genuine."

He found Crescent Villas after some difficulty. The houses were large, but they lay half embedded amongst the chaos of brick and mortar rising around them. New terraces, new streets, new squares led away into hopeless masses of stone and plaster on every side. The roads were sticky with damp clay, which clogged the wheels of the cab and buried the fetlocks of the horse. The desolation of desolations — that awful



aspect of incompleteness and discomfort which pervades a new and unfinished neighbourhood — had set its dismal seal upon the surrounding streets which had arisen about and entrenched Crescent Villas; and Robert wasted forty minutes by his own watch, and an hour and a quarter according to the cabman's reckoning, in driving up and down uninhabited streets and terraces, trying to find the Villas; whose chimney-pots were frowning down upon him, black and venerable, amid groves of virgin plaster, undimmed by time or smoke.

But having at last succeeded in reaching his destination, Mr. Audley alighted from the cab, directed the driver to wait for him at a certain corner, and set out upon his voyage of discovery.

"If I were a distinguished Q. C., I could not do this sort of thing," he thought; "my time would be worth a guinea or so a minute, and I should be retained in the great case of *Hoggs v. Boggs*, going forward this very day before a special jury at Westminster Hall. As it is, I can afford to be patient."

He inquired for Mrs. Vincent at the number which Mr. Dawson had given him. The maid who opened the door had never heard that lady's name: but after going to inquire of her mistress, she returned to tell Robert that Mrs. Vincent had lived there, but that she had left two months before the present occupants had entered the house, "and missus has been here fifteen months," the girl added, explanatorily.

"But you cannot tell me where she went on leaving here?" Robert asked, despondingly.



"No, sir; missus says she believes the lady failed, and that she left sudden like, and didn't want her address to be known in the neighbourhood."

Mr. Audley felt himself at a standstill once more. If Mrs. Vincent had left the place in debt, she had no doubt scrupulously concealed her whereabouts. There was little hope, then, of learning her address from any of the tradespeople; and yet, on the other hand, it was just possible that some of her sharpest creditors might have made it their business to discover the defaulter's retreat.

He looked about him for the nearest shops, and found a baker's, a stationer's, and a fruiterer's, a few paces from the crescent. Three empty-looking, pretentious shops, with plate-glass windows, and a hopeless air of gentility.

He stopped at the baker's, who called himself a pastrycook and confectioner, and exhibited some specimens of petrified sponge-cake in glass bottles, and some highly-glazed tarts, covered with green gauze.

"She *must* have bought bread," Robert thought, as he deliberated before the baker's shop; "and she is likely to have bought it at the handiest place. I'll try the baker."

The baker was standing behind his counter, disputing the items of a bill with a shabby-genteel young woman. He did not trouble himself to attend to Robert Audley till he had settled the dispute, but he looked up as he was receipting the bill, and asked the barrister what he pleased to want.



"Can you tell me the address of a Mrs. Vincent, who lived at No. 9, Crescent Villas, a year and a half ago?" Mr. Audley inquired, mildly.

"No, I can't," answered the baker, growing very red in the face, and speaking in an unnecessarily loud voice; "and what's more, I wish I could. That lady owes me upwards of eleven pound for bread, and it's rather more than I can afford to lose. If anybody can tell me where she lives, I shall be much obliged to 'em for so doing."

Robert Audley shrugged his shoulders, and wished the man good morning. He felt that his discovery of the lady's whereabouts would involve more trouble than he had expected. He might have looked for Mrs. Vincent's name in the *Post Office Directory*, but he thought it scarcely likely that a lady who was on such uncomfortable terms with her creditors would afford them so easy a means of ascertaining her residence.

"If the baker can't find her, how should *I* find her?" he thought, despairingly. "If a resolute, sanguine, active, and energetic creature, such as the baker, fail to achieve this business, how can a lymphatic wretch like me hope to accomplish it? Where the baker has been defeated, what preposterous folly it would be for me to try to succeed."

Mr. Audley abandoned himself to these gloomy reflections as he walked slowly back towards the corner at which he had left the cab. About half-way between the baker's shop and this corner, he was



arrested by hearing a woman's step close at his side, and a woman's voice asking him to stop. He turned and found himself face to face with the shabbily-dressed woman whom he had left settling her account with the baker.

"Eh, what?" he asked, vaguely. "Can I do anything for you, ma'am? Does Mrs. Vincent owe *you* money, too?"

"Yes, sir," the woman answered, with a semi-genteel manner which corresponded with the shabby gentility of her dress; "Mrs. Vincent is in my debt; but it isn't that, sir. I — I want to know, please, what your business may be with her — because — because —"

"You can give me her address if you choose, ma'am? That's what you mean to say, isn't it?"

The woman hesitated a little, looking rather suspiciously at Robert.

"You're not connected with — with the tally business, are you, sir?" she asked, after considering Mr. Audley's personal appearance for a few moments.

"The *what*, ma'am?" cried the young barrister, staring aghast at his questioner.

"I'm sure I beg your pardon, sir," exclaimed the little woman, seeing that she had made some very awful mistake. "I thought you might have been, you know. Some of the gentlemen who collect for the tally-shops do dress so very handsome; and I know Mrs. Vincent owes a good deal of money."



Robert Audley laid his hand upon the speaker's arm.

"My dear madam," he said, "I want to know nothing of Mrs. Vincent's affairs. So far from being concerned in what you call *the tally business*, I have not the remotest idea of what you mean by that expression. You may mean a political conspiracy; you may mean some new species of taxes. Mrs. Vincent does not owe *me* any money, however badly she may stand with that awful-looking baker. I never saw her in my life; but I wish to see her to-day for the simple purpose of asking her a few very plain questions about a young lady who once resided in her house. If you know where Mrs. Vincent lives, and will give me her address, you will be doing me a great favour."

He took out his card-case and handed a card to the woman, who examined the slip of pasteboard anxiously before she spoke again.

"I'm sure you look and speak like a gentleman, sir," she said, after a brief pause, "and I hope you will excuse me if I've seemed mistrustful like; but poor Mrs. Vincent has had dreadful difficulties, and I'm the only person hereabouts that she's trusted with her addresses. I'm a dressmaker, sir, and I've worked for her for upwards of six years, and though she doesn't pay me regular, you know, sir, she gives me a little money on account now and then, and I get on as well as I can. I may tell you where she lives, then, sir? You haven't deceived me, have you?"

"On my honour, no."



"Well, then, sir," said the dressmaker, dropping her voice as if she thought the pavement beneath her feet, or the iron railings before the houses by her side, might have ears to hear her, "it's Acacia Cottage, Peckham Grove. I took a dress there yesterday for Mrs. Vincent."

"Thank you," said Robert, writing the address in his pocket-book. "I am very much obliged to you, and you may rely upon it, Mrs. Vincent shall not suffer any inconvenience through me."

He lifted his hat, bowed to the little dressmaker, and turned back to the cab.

"I have beaten the baker at any rate," he thought. "Now for the second stage, travelling backwards, in my lady's life."

The drive from Brompton to the Peckham-road was a very long one, and between Crescent Villas and Acacia Cottage Robert Audley had ample leisure for reflection. He thought of his uncle, lying weak and ill in the oak-room at Audley Court. He thought of the beautiful blue eyes watching Sir Michael's slumbers; the soft white hands tending on his waking wants; the low, musical voice soothing his loneliness; cheering and consoling his declining years. What a pleasant picture it might have been, had he been able to look upon it ignorantly, seeing no more than others saw, looking no farther than a stranger could look. But with the black cloud which he saw, or fancied he saw, brooding over it, what an arch mockery, what a diabolical delusion it seemed.



Peckham Grove — pleasant enough in the summer-time — has rather a dismal aspect upon a dull February day, when the trees are bare and leafless, and the little gardens desolate. Acacia Cottage bore small token of the fitness of its nomenclature, and faced the road with its stuccoed walls, sheltered only by a couple of tall attenuated poplars. But it announced that it was Acacia Cottage by means of a small brass-plate upon one of the gate-posts, which was sufficient indication for the sharp-sighted cabman, who dropped Mr. Audley upon the pavement before the little gate.

Acacia Cottage was much lower in the social scale than Crescent Villas, and the small maid-servant who came to the low wooden gate and parleyed with Mr. Audley, was evidently well used to the encounter of relentless creditors across the same feeble barricade.

She murmured the familiar domestic fiction of uncertainty regarding her mistress's whereabouts; and told Robert that if he would please to state his name and business, she would go and see if Mrs. Vincent was at home.

Mr. Audley produced a card, and wrote in pencil under his own name — "A connection of the late Miss Graham."

He directed the small servant to carry this card to her mistress, and quietly awaited the result.

The servant returned in about five minutes with the key of the gate. Her mistress was at home, she told Robert as she admitted him, and would be happy to see the gentleman.



The square parlour into which Robert was ushered bore in every scrap of ornament, in every article of furniture, the unmistakeable stamp of that species of poverty which is most comfortless, because it is never stationary. The mechanic who furnishes his tiny sitting-room with half-a-dozen cane chairs, a Pembroke table, a Dutch clock, a tiny looking-glass, a crockery shepherd and shepherdess, and a set of gaudily-japanned iron tea trays, makes the most of his limited possessions, and generally contrives to get some degree of comfort out of them; but the lady who loses the handsome furniture of the house she is compelled to abandon and encamps in some smaller habitation with the shabby remainder — bought in by some merciful friend at the sale of her effects — carries with her an aspect of genteel desolation and tawdry misery not easily to be paralleled in wretchedness by any other phase which poverty can assume.

The room which Robert Audley surveyed was furnished with the shabbier scraps snatched from the ruin which had overtaken the imprudent schoolmistress in Crescent Villas. A cottage piano, a cheffonier, six sizes too large for the room, and dismally gorgeous in gilded mouldings that were chipped and broken; a slim-legged card-table, placed in the post of honour, formed the principal pieces of furniture. A threadbare patch of Brussels carpet covered the centre of the room, and formed an oasis of roses and lilies upon a desert of faded green drugget. Knitted curtains shaded the windows, in which hung wire baskets of horrible-



looking plants of the cactus species, that grew downwards like some demented class of vegetation, whose prickly and spider-like members had a fancy for standing on their heads.

The green-baize covered card-table was adorned with gaudily-bound annuals or books of beauty, placed at right angles; but Robert Audley did not avail himself of these literary distractions. He seated himself upon one of the rickety chairs, and waited patiently for the advent of the schoolmistress. He could hear the hum of half-a-dozen voices in a room near him, and the jingling harmonies of a set of variations to *Deh Conte*, upon a piano, whose every wire was evidently in the last stage of attenuation.

He had waited for about a quarter of an hour, when the door was opened, and a lady, very much dressed, and with the setting sunlight of faded beauty upon her face, entered the room.

"Mr. Audley, I presume," she said, motioning to Robert to reseate himself, and placing herself in an easy-chair opposite to him. "You will pardon me, I hope, for detaining you so long; my duties —"

"It is I who should apologise for intruding upon you," Robert answered, politely; "but my motive for calling upon you is a very serious one, and must plead my excuse. You remember the lady whose name I wrote upon my card?"

"Perfectly."

"May I ask how much you know of that lady's history since her departure from your house?"



"Very little. In point of fact, scarcely anything at all. Miss Graham, I believe, obtained a situation in the family of a surgeon resident in Essex. Indeed, it was I who recommended her to that gentleman. I have never heard from her since she left me."

"But you have communicated with her?" Robert asked, eagerly.

"No, indeed."

Mr. Audley was silent for a few moments, the shadow of gloomy thoughts gathering darkly on his face.

"May I ask if you sent a telegraphic despatch to Miss Graham early in last September, stating that you were dangerously ill, and that you wished to see her?"

Mrs. Vincent smiled at her visitor's question.

"I had no occasion to send such a message," she said, "I have never been seriously ill in my life."

Robert Audley paused before he asked any further questions, and scrawled a few pencilled words in his note-book.

"If I ask you a few straightforward questions about Miss Lucy Graham, madam," he said, "will you do me the favour to answer them without asking my motive for making such inquiries?"

"Most certainly," replied Mrs. Vincent. "I know nothing to Miss Graham's disadvantage, and have no justification for making a mystery of the little I do know."



"Then will you tell me at what date the young lady first came to you?"

Mrs. Vincent smiled and shook her head. She had a pretty smile — the frank smile of a woman who has been admired, and who has too long felt the certainty of being able to please, to be utterly subjugated by any worldly misfortune.

"It's not the least use to ask me, Mr. Audley," she said. "I'm the most careless creature in the world; I never did, and never could remember dates, though I do all in my power to impress upon my girls how important it is for their future welfare that they should know when William the Conqueror began to reign, and all that kind of thing. But I haven't the remotest idea when Miss Graham came to me, although I know it was ages ago, for it was the very summer I had my peach-coloured silk. But we must consult Tonks — Tonks is sure to be right."

Robert Audley wondered who or what Tonks could be; a diary, perhaps, or a memorandum-book — some obscure rival of Letsome.

Mrs. Vincent rang the bell, which was answered by the maid-servant who had admitted Robert.

"Ask Miss Tonks to come to me," she said, "I want to see her particularly."

In less than five minutes Miss Tonks made her appearance. She was wintry and rather frostbitten in aspect, and seemed to bring cold air in the scanty folds of her sombre merino dress. She was no age in particular, and looked as if she had never been younger,



and would never grow older, but would remain for ever working backwards and forwards in her narrow groove, like some self-feeding machine for the instruction of young ladies.

"Tonks, my dear," said Mrs. Vincent, without ceremony, "this gentleman is a relative of Miss Graham's. Do you remember how long it is since she came to us at Crescent Villas?"

"She came in August, 1854," answered Miss Tonks; "I think it was the eighteenth of August, but I'm not quite sure that it wasn't the seventeenth. I know it was on a Tuesday."

"Thank you, Tonks; you are a most invaluable darling," exclaimed Mrs. Vincent, with her sweetest smile. It was, perhaps, because of the invaluable nature of Miss Tonks's services that she had received no remuneration whatever from her employer for the last three or four years. Mrs. Vincent might have hesitated to pay her from very contempt for the pitiful nature of the stipend as compared with the merits of the teacher.

"Is there anything else that Tonks or I can tell you, Mr. Audley?" asked the schoolmistress. "Tonks has a far better memory than I have."

"Can you tell me where Miss Graham came from when she entered your household?" Robert inquired.

"Not very precisely," answered Mrs. Vincent. "I have a vague notion that Miss Graham said something about coming from the sea-side, but she didn't say



where, or if she did I have forgotten it. Tonks, did Miss Graham tell you where she came from?"

"Oh, no!" replied Miss Tonks, shaking her grim little head significantly. "Miss Graham told me nothing; she was too clever for that. She knew how to keep her own secrets, in spite of her innocent ways and her curly hair," Miss Tonks added, spitefully.

"You think she had secrets, then?" Robert asked, rather eagerly.

"I know she had," replied Miss Tonks with frosty decision; "all manner of secrets. I wouldn't have engaged such a person as junior teacher in a respectable school, without so much as one word of recommendation from any living creature."

"You had no reference, then, from Miss Graham?" asked Robert, addressing Mrs. Vincent.

"No," the lady answered, with some little embarrassment; "I waived that. Miss Graham waived the question of salary; I could not do less than waive the question of reference. She had quarrelled with her papa, she told me, and she wanted to find a home away from all the people she had ever known. She wished to keep herself quite separate from these people. She had endured so much, she said, young as she was, and she wanted to escape from her troubles. How could I press her for a reference under these circumstances? especially when I saw that she was a perfect lady? You know that Lucy Graham was a perfect lady, Tonks, and it is very unkind of you to say



such cruel things about my taking her without a reference."

"When people make favourites, they are apt to be deceived by them," Miss Tonks answered, with icy sententiousness, and with no very perceptible relevance to the point in discussion.

"I never made her a favourite, you jealous Tonks," Mrs. Vincent answered, reproachfully. "I never said she was as useful as you, dear. You know I never did."

"Oh, no!" replied Miss Tonks, with a chilling accent, "you never said she was *useful*. She was only ornamental; a person to be shown off to visitors, and to play fantasias on the drawing-room piano."

"Then you can give me no clue to Miss Graham's previous history?" Robert asked, looking from the schoolmistress to her teacher. He saw very clearly that Miss Tonks bore an envious grudge against Lucy Graham — a grudge which even the lapse of time had not healed.

"If this woman knows anything to my lady's detriment, she will tell it," he thought. "She will tell it only too willingly."

But Miss Tonks appeared to know nothing whatever; except that Miss Graham had sometimes declared herself an ill-used creature, deceived by the baseness of mankind, and the victim of unmerited sufferings, in the way of poverty and deprivation. Beyond this, Miss Tonks could tell nothing; and although she made



the most of what she did know, Robert very soon sounded the depth of her small stock of information.

"I have only one more question to ask," he said at last. "It is this. Did Miss Graham leave any books or knick-knacks, or any kind of property whatever, behind her, when she left your establishment?"

"Not to my knowledge," Mrs. Vincent replied.

"Yes," cried Miss Tonks, sharply. "She did leave something. She left a box. It's up-stairs in my room. I've got an old bonnet in it. Would you like to see the box?" she asked, addressing Robert.

"If you will be so good as to allow me," he answered, "I should very much like to see it."

"I'll fetch it down," said Miss Tonks. "It's not very big."

She ran out of the room before Mr. Audley had time to utter any polite remonstrance.

"How pitiless these women are to each other," he thought, while the teacher was absent. "This one knows intuitively that there is some danger to the other lurking beneath my questions. She sniffs the coming trouble to her fellow female creature, and rejoices in it, and would take any pains to help me. What a world it is, and how these women take life out of our hands. Helen Maldon, Lady Audley, Clara Talboys, and now Miss Tonks — all womankind from beginning to end."

Miss Tonks re-entered while the young barrister was meditating upon the infamy of her sex. She



carried a dilapidated paper-covered bonnet-box, which she submitted to Robert's inspection.

Mr. Audley knelt down to examine the scraps of railway labels and addresses which were pasted here and there upon the box. It had been battered upon a great many different lines of railway, and had evidently travelled considerably. Many of the labels had been torn off, but fragments of some of them remained, and upon one yellow scrap of paper Robert read the letters TURI.

"The box has been to Italy," he thought. "Those are the first four letters of the word Turin, and the label is a foreign one."

The only direction which had not been either defaced or torn away was the last, which bore the name of Miss Graham, passenger to London. Looking very closely at this label, Mr. Audley discovered that it had been pasted over another.

"Will you be so good as to let me have a little water and a piece of sponge?" he said. "I want to get off this upper label. Believe me that I am justified in what I am doing."

Miss Tonks ran out of the room, and returned immediately with a basin of water and a sponge.

"Shall I take off the label?" she asked.

"No, thank you," Robert answered, coldly. "I can do it very well myself."

He damped the upper label several times before he could loosen the edges of the paper; but after two



or three careful attempts, the moistened surface peeled off without injury to the underneath address.

Miss Tonks could not contrive to read this address across Robert's shoulder, though she exhibited considerable dexterity in her endeavours to accomplish that object.

Mr. Audley repeated his operations upon the lower label, which he removed from the box, and placed very carefully between two blank leaves of his pocket-book.

"I need intrude upon you no longer, ladies," he said, when he had done this. "I am extremely obliged to you for having afforded me all the information in your power. I wish you good morning."

Mrs. Vincent smiled and bowed, murmuring some complacent conventionality about the delight she had felt in Mr. Audley's visit. Miss Tonks, more observant, stared at the white change which had come over the young man's face since he had removed the upper label from the box.

Robert walked slowly away from Acacia Cottage. "If that which I have found to-day is no evidence for a jury," he thought, "it is surely enough to convince my uncle that he has married a designing and infamous woman."

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## CHAPTER II.

Beginning at the Other End.

ROBERT AUDLEY walked slowly through the leafless grove, under the bare and shadowless trees in the grey February atmosphere, thinking as he went of the discovery he had just made.

"I have that in my pocket-book," he pondered, "which forms the connecting link between the woman whose death George Talboys read of in the *Times* newspaper and the woman who rules in my uncle's house. The history of Lucy Graham ends abruptly on the threshold of Mrs. Vincent's school. She entered that establishment in August, 1854. The schoolmistress and her assistant can tell me this, but they cannot tell me whence she came. They cannot give me one clue to the secrets of her life from the day of her birth until the day she entered that house. I can go no further in this backward investigation of my lady's antecedents. What am I to do, then, if I mean to keep my promise to Clara Talboys?"

He walked on for a few paces revolving this question in his mind, with a darker shadow than the shadows of the gathering winter twilight on his face, and a heavy oppression of mingled sorrow and dread weighing down his heart.

"My duty is clear enough," he thought — "not the



less clear because it is painful — not the less clear because it leads me step by step, carrying ruin and desolation with me, to the home I love. I must begin at the other end — I must begin at the other end, and discover the history of Helen Talboys from the hour of George's departure until the day of the funeral in the churchyard at Ventnor."

Mr. Audley hailed a passing Hansom, and drove back to his chambers.

He reached Fig-tree Court in time to write a few lines to Miss Talboys, and to post his letter at St. Martin's-le-Grand before six o'clock.

"It will save me a day," he thought, as he drove to the General Post Office with this brief epistle.

He had written to Clara Talboys to inquire the name of the little seaport town in which George had met Captain Maldon and his daughter; for in spite of the intimacy between the two young men, Robert Audley knew very few particulars of his friend's brief married life.

From the hour in which George Talboys had read the announcement of his wife's death in the columns of the *Times*, he had avoided all mention of the tender history which had been so cruelly broken, the familiar record which had been so darkly blotted out.

There was so much that was painful in that brief story! There was such bitter self-reproach involved in the recollection of that desertion which must have seemed so cruel to her who waited and watched at home! Robert Audley comprehended this, and he did



not wonder at his friend's silence. The sorrowful story had been tacitly avoided by both, and Robert was as ignorant of the unhappy history of this one year in his schoolfellow's life as if they had never lived together in friendly companionship in those snug Temple chambers.

The letter, written to Miss Talboys by her brother George within a month of his marriage, was dated Harrowgate. It was at Harrowgate, therefore, Robert concluded, the young couple spent their honeymoon.

Robert Audley had requested Clara Talboys to telegraph an answer to his question, in order to avoid the loss of a day in the accomplishment of the investigation he had promised to perform.

The telegraphic answer reached Fig-tree Court before twelve o'clock the next day.

The name of the seaport town was Wildernsea, Yorkshire.

Within an hour of the receipt of this message Mr. Audley arrived at the King's-cross station, and took his ticket for Wildernsea by an express train that started at a quarter before two.

The shrieking engine bore him on the dreary northward journey, whirling him over desert wastes of flat meadow-land and bare corn-fields, faintly tinted with fresh sprouting green. This northern road was strange and unfamiliar to the young barrister, and the wide expanse of the wintry landscape chilled him by its aspect of bare loneliness. The knowledge of the purpose of his journey blighted every object upon which his absent glances fixed themselves for a mo-



ment; only to wander wearily away; only to turn inwards upon that far darker picture always presenting itself to his anxious mind.

It was dark when the train reached the Hull terminus; but Mr. Audley's journey was not ended. Amidst a crowd of porters and scattered heaps of that incongruous and heterogeneous luggage with which travellers encumber themselves, he was led, bewildered and half asleep, to another train, which was to convey him along the branch line that swept past Wildernsea, and skirted the border of the German Ocean.

Half an hour after leaving Hull, Robert felt the briny freshness of the sea upon the breeze that blew in at the open window of the carriage, and an hour afterwards the train stopped at a melancholy station, built amid a sandy desert, and inhabited by two or three gloomy officials, one of whom rang a terrific peal upon a harshly clanging bell as the train approached.

Mr. Audley was the only passenger who alighted at the dismal station. The train swept on to gayer scenes before the barrister had time to collect his scattered senses, or to pick up the portmanteau which had been discovered with some difficulty amid a black cavern of luggage only illuminated by one lantern.

"I wonder whether settlers in the back-woods of America feel as solitary and strange as I feel to-night?" he thought, as he stared hopelessly about him in the darkness.

He called to one of the officials, and pointed to his portmanteau.



"Will you carry that to the nearest hotel for me?" he asked — "that is to say, if I can get a good bed there."

The man laughed as he shouldered the portmanteau.

"You could get thirty beds, I daresay, sir, if you wanted 'em," he said. "We ain't over busy at Wildernsea at this time o' year. This way, sir."

The porter opened a wooden door in the station wall, and Robert Audley found himself upon a wide bowling-green of smooth grass, which surrounded a huge square building that loomed darkly on him through the winter's night, its black solidity only relieved by two lighted windows, far apart from each other, and glimmering redly like beacons on the darkness.

"This is the Victoria Hotel, sir," said the porter. "You wouldn't believe the crowds of company we have down here in the summer."

In the face of the bare grass-plat, the tenantless wooden alcoves, and the dark windows of the hotel, it was indeed rather difficult to imagine that the place was ever gay with merry people taking pleasure in the bright summer weather; but Robert Audley declared himself willing to believe anything the porter pleased to tell him, and followed his guide meekly to a little door at the side of the big hotel, which led into a comfortable bar, where the humbler classes of summer visitors were accommodated with such refreshments as they pleased to pay for, without running the gauntlet



of the prim, white-waistcoated waiters on guard at the principal entrance.

But there were very few attendants retained at the hotel in this bleak February season, and it was the landlord himself who ushered Robert into a dreary wilderness of polished mahogany tables and horsehair-cushioned chairs, which he called the coffee room.

Mr. Audley seated himself close to the wide steel fender, and stretched his cramped legs upon the hearthrug, while the landlord drove the poker into the vast pile of coal, and sent a ruddy blaze roaring upward through the chimney.

"If you would prefer a private room, sir —" the man began.

"No, thank you," said Robert, indifferently; "this room seems quite private enough just now. If you will order me a mutton chop and a pint of sherry, I shall be obliged."

"Certainly sir."

"And I shall be still more obliged if you will favour me with a few minutes' conversation before you do so."

"With very great pleasure, sir," the landlord answered, good-naturedly. "We see so very little company at this season of the year, that we are only too glad to oblige those gentlemen who do visit us. Any information which I can afford you respecting the neighbourhood of Wildernsea and its attractions," added the landlord, unconsciously quoting a small hand-book



of the watering place which he sold in the bar, "I shall be most happy to —."

"But I don't want to know anything about the neighbourhood of Wildernsea," interrupted Robert, with a feeble protest against the landlord's volubility. "I want to ask you a few questions about some people who once lived here."

The landlord bowed and smiled, with an air which implied his readiness to recite the biographies of all the inhabitants of the little seaport, if required by Mr. Audley to do so.

"How many years have you lived here?" Robert asked, taking his memorandum-book from his pocket. "Will it annoy you if I make notes of your replies to my questions?"

"Not at all, sir," replied the landlord, with a pompous enjoyment of the air of solemnity and importance which pervaded this business. "Any information which I can afford that is likely to be of ultimate value —"

"Yes, thank you," Robert murmured, interrupting the flow of words. "You have lived here —"

"Six years, sir."

"Since the year fifty-three."

"Since November in the year fifty-two, sir. I was in business in Hull prior to that time. This house was only completed in the October before I entered it."

"Do you remember a lieutenant in the navy, on half-pay I believe at that time, called Maldon?"

"Captain Maldon, sir?"



"Yes, commonly called Captain Maldon. I see you do remember him."

"Yes, sir. Captain Maldon was one of our best customers. He used to spend his evenings in this very room, though the walls were damp at that time, and we weren't able to paper the place for nearly a twelve-month afterwards. His daughter married a young officer that came here with his regiment at Christmas time in fifty-two. They were married here, sir, and they travelled on the Continent for six months, and came back here again. But the gentleman ran away to Australia, and left the lady, a week or two after her baby was born. The business made quite a sensation in Wildernsea, sir, and Mrs. — Mrs. — I forget the name —"

"Mrs. Talboys," suggested Robert.

"To be sure, sir, Mrs. Talboys. Mrs. Talboys was very much pitied by the Wildernsea folks, sir, I was going to say, for she was very pretty, and had such nice winning ways, that she was a favourite with everybody who knew her."

"Can you tell me how long Mr. Maldon and his daughter remained at Wildernsea after Mr. Talboys left them?" Robert asked.

"Well — no, sir," answered the landlord, after a few moments' deliberation. "I can't say exactly how long it was. I know Mr. Maldon used to sit here in this very parlour, and tell people how badly his daughter had been treated, and how he'd been deceived by a young man he'd put so much confidence in; but



I can't say how long it was before he left Wildernsea. But Mrs. Barkamb could tell you, sir," added the landlord, briskly.

"Mrs. Barkamb?"

"Yes, Mrs. Barkamb is the person who owns No. 17, North Cottages, the house in which Mr. Maldon and his daughter lived. She's a nice, civil-spoken, motherly woman, sir, and I'm sure she'll tell you anything you may want to know."

"Thank you, I will call upon Mrs. Barkamb tomorrow. Stay — one more question. Should you recognise Mrs. Talboys if you were to see her?"

"Certainly, sir. As sure as I should recognise one of my own daughters."

Robert Audley wrote Mrs. Barkamb's address in his pocket-book, ate his solitary dinner, drank a couple of glasses of sherry, smoked a cigar, and then retired to the apartment in which a fire had been lighted for his comfort.

He soon fell asleep, worn out with the fatigue of hurrying from place to place during the last two days; but his slumber was not a heavy one, and he heard the disconsolate moaning of the wind upon the sandy wastes, and the long waves rolling in monotonously upon the flat shore. Mingling with these dismal sounds, the melancholy thoughts engendered by his joyless journey repeated themselves in ever-varying succession in the chaos of his slumbering brain, and made themselves into visions of things that never had been and never could be upon this earth; but which had some



vague relation to real events, remembered by the sleeper.

In those troublesome dreams he saw Audley Court, rooted up from amidst the green pastures and the shady hedgerows of Essex, standing bare and unprotected upon that desolate northern shore, threatened by the rapid rising of a boisterous sea, whose waves seemed gathering upward to descend and crush the house he loved. As the hurrying waves rolled nearer and nearer to the stately mansion, the sleeper saw a pale, starry face looking out of the silvery foam, and knew that it was my lady, transformed into a mermaid, beckoning his uncle to destruction. Beyond that rising sea great masses of cloud, blacker than the blackest ink, more dense than the darkest night, lowered upon the dreamer's eye; but as he looked at the dismal horizon the storm clouds slowly parted, and from a narrow rent in the darkness a ray of light streamed out upon the hideous waves, which slowly, very slowly, receded, leaving the old mansion safe and firmly rooted on the shore.

Robert awoke with the memory of this dream in his mind, and a sensation of physical relief, as if some heavy weight, which had oppressed him all the night, had been lifted from his breast.

He fell asleep again, and did not awake until the broad winter sunlight shone upon the window-blind, and the shrill voice of the chamber-maid at his door announced that it was half-past eight o'clock. At a quarter before ten he had left the Victoria Hotel, and



was making his way along the lonely platform in front of a row of shadowless houses that faced the sea.

This row of hard, uncompromising, square-built habitations stretched away to the little harbour, in which two or three merchant vessels and a couple of colliers were anchored. Beyond the harbour there loomed, grey and cold upon the wintry horizon, a dismal barrack, parted from the Wildernsea houses by a narrow creek, spanned by an iron draw-bridge. The scarlet coat of the sentinel who walked backwards and forwards between two cannons, placed at remote angles before the barrack wall, was the only scrap of colour that relieved the neutral-tinted picture of the grey stone houses and the leaden sea.

On one side of the harbour a long stone pier stretched out far away into the cruel loneliness of the sea, as if built for the especial accommodation of some modern Timon, too misanthropical to be satisfied even by the solitude of Wildernsea, and anxious to get still further away from his fellow-creatures.

It was on that pier George Talboys had first met his wife, under the yellow glory of a sunny sky, and to the music of a braying band. It was there that the young cornet had first yielded to that sweet delusion, that fatal infatuation which had exercised so dark an influence upon his after-life.

Robert looked savagely at the solitary watering-place — the shabby seaport.

“It is such a place as this,” he thought, “that



works a strong man's ruin. He comes here, heart whole and happy, with no better experience of woman than is to be learnt at a flower-show or in a ball-room; with no more familiar knowledge of the creature than he has of the far-away satellites of the remoter planets; with a vague notion that she is a whirling teetotum in pink or blue gauze, or a graceful automaton for the display of milliners' manufacture. He comes to some place of this kind, and the universe is suddenly narrowed into about half a dozen acres; the mighty scheme of creation is crushed into a bandbox. The far-away creatures whom he had seen floating about him, beautiful and indistinct, are brought under his very nose; and before he has time to recover his bewilderment, hey, presto! the witchcraft has begun: the magic circle is drawn around him, the spells are at work, the whole formula of sorcery is in full play, and the victim is as powerless to escape as the marble-legged prince in the Eastern story."

Ruminating in this wise, Robert Audley reached the house to which he had been directed as the residence of Mrs. Barkamb. He was admitted immediately by a prim, elderly servant, who ushered him into a sitting-room as prim and elderly-looking as herself. Mrs. Barkamb, a comfortable matron of about sixty years of age, was sitting in an arm-chair before a bright handful of fire in the shining grate. An elderly terrier, whose black-and-tan coat was thickly sprinkled with grey, reposed in Mrs. Barkamb's lap. Every object in the quiet sitting-room had an elderly



aspect; an aspect of simple comfort and precision, which is the evidence of outward repose.

"I should like to live here," Robert thought, "and watch the grey sea slowly rolling over the grey sand under the still grey sky. I should like to live here, and tell the beads upon my rosary, and repent and rest."

He seated himself in the arm-chair opposite Mrs. Barkamb, at that lady's invitation, and placed his hat upon the ground. The elderly terrier descended from his mistress's lap to bark at and otherwise take objection to this hat.

"You were wishing, I suppose, sir, to take one — be quiet, Dash — one of the cottages," suggested Mrs. Barkamb, whose mind ran in one narrow groove, and whose life during the last twenty years had been an unvarying round of house-letting.

Robert Audley explained the purpose of his visit.

"I come to ask one simple question," he said, in conclusion. "I wish to discover the exact date of Mrs. Talboys' departure from Wildernsea. The proprietor of the Victoria Hotel informed me that you were the most likely person to afford me that information."

Mrs. Barkamb deliberated for some moments.

"I can give you the date of Captain Maldon's departure," she said, "for he left No. 17 considerably in my debt, and I have the whole business in black and white; but with regard to Mrs. Talboys ——"



Mrs. Barkamb paused for a few moments before resuming.

"You are aware that Mrs. Talboys left rather abruptly?" she asked.

"I was not aware of that fact."

"Indeed! Yes, she left abruptly, poor little woman! She tried to support herself after her husband's desertion by giving music lessons; she was a very brilliant pianist, and succeeded pretty well, I believe. But I suppose her father took her money from her, and spent it in public-houses. However that might be, they had a very serious misunderstanding one night; and the next morning Mrs. Talboys left Wildernsea, leaving her little boy, who was out at nurse in the neighbourhood."

"But you cannot tell me the date of her departure?"

"I'm afraid not," answered Mrs. Barkamb; "and yet, stay. Captain Maldon wrote to me upon the day his daughter left. He was in very great distress, poor old gentleman, and he always came to me in his troubles. If I could find that letter, it might be dated, you know — mightn't it, now?"

Mr. Audley said that it was only probable the letter was dated.

Mrs. Barkamb retired to a table in the window on which stood an old-fashioned mahogany desk lined with green baize, and suffering from a plethora of documents, which oozed out of it in every direction. Letters, receipts, bills, inventories, and tax-papers were



mingled in hopeless confusion; and amongst these Mrs. Barkamb set to work to search for Captain Maldon's letter.

Mr. Audley waited very patiently, watching the grey clouds sailing across the grey sky, the grey vessels gliding past upon the grey sea.

After about ten minutes' search, and a great deal of rustling, crackling, folding and unfolding of the papers, Mrs. Barkamb uttered an exclamation of triumph.

"I've got the letter," she said; "and there's a note inside it from Mrs. Talboys."

Robert Audley's pale face flushed a vivid crimson as he stretched out his hand to receive the papers.

"The person who stole Helen Maldon's love-letters from George's trunk in my chambers might have spared themselves the trouble," he thought.

The letter from the old lieutenant was not long, but almost every other word was underscored.

"My generous friend," the writer began —

[Mr. Maldon had tried the lady's generosity pretty severely during his residence in her house, rarely paying his rent until threatened with the intruding presence of the broker's man.]

"I am in the *depths* of *despair*. My daughter has *left me!* You may *imagine my feelings!* We had a *few words* last night upon the subject of *money matters*, which subject has always been a *disagreeable* one between us, and on rising this morning I found that I



was *deserted*! The *enclosed* from Helen was waiting for me on the parlour table.

"Yours in *distraktion* and *despair*,

"HENRY MALDON.

"North Cottages,

August 16th, 1854."

The note from Mrs. Talboys was still more brief. It began abruptly thus: —

"I am weary of my life here, and wish, if I can, to find a new one. I go out into the world, dissevered from every link which binds me to the hateful past, to seek another home and another fortune. Forgive me if I have been fretful, capricious, changeable. You should forgive me, for you know *why* I have been so. You know the *secret* which is the key to my life.

"HELEN TALBOYS."

These lines were written in a hand that Robert Audley knew only too well.

He sat for a long time pondering silently over the letter written by Helen Talboys.

What was the meaning of those two last sentences — "You should forgive me, for you know *why* I have been so. You know the *secret* which is the key to my life?"

He wearied his brain in endeavouring to find a clue to the signification of those two sentences. He could remember nothing, nor could he imagine anything that would throw a light upon their meaning.



The date of Helen's departure, according to Mr. Maldon's letter, was the 16th of August, 1854. Miss Tonks had declared that Lucy Graham entered the school at Crescent Villas upon the 17th or 18th of August in the same year. Between the departure of Helen Talboys from the Yorkshire watering-place, and the arrival of Lucy Graham at the Brompton school, not more than eight-and-forty hours could have elapsed. This made a very small link in the chain of circumstantial evidence, perhaps; but it was a link, nevertheless, and it fitted neatly into its place.

"Did Mr. Maldon hear from his daughter after she had left Wildernsea?" Robert asked.

"Well, I believe he did hear from her," Mrs. Barkamb answered; "but I didn't see much of the old gentleman after that August. I was obliged to sell him up in November, poor fellow, for he owed me fifteen months' rent; and it was only by selling his poor little bits of furniture that I could get him out of my place. We parted very good friends, in spite of my sending in the brokers; and the old gentleman went to London with the child, who was scarcely a twelvemonth old."

Mrs. Barkamb had nothing more to tell, and Robert had no further questions to ask. He requested permission to retain the two letters written by the lieutenant and his daughter, and left the house with them in his pocket-book.

He walked straight back to the hotel, where he called for a time-table. An express for London left



Wildernsea at a quarter-past one. Robert sent his portmanteau to the station, paid his bill, and walked up and down the stone terrace fronting the sea, waiting for the starting of the train.

"I have traced the histories of Lucy Graham and Helen Talboys to a vanishing point," he thought; "my next business is to discover the history of the woman who lies buried in Ventnor churchyard."

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## CHAPTER III.

Hidden in the Grave.

UPON his return from Wildernsea, Robert Audley found a letter from his cousin, Alicia, awaiting him at his chambers.

"Papa is much better," the young lady wrote, "and is very anxious to have you at the Court. For some inexplicable reason, my step-mother has taken it into her head that your presence is extremely desirable, and worries me with her frivolous questions about your movements. So pray come without delay, and set these people at rest. Your affectionate cousin,

A. A."

"So my lady is anxious to know my movements," thought Robert Audley, as he sat brooding and smoking by his lonely fireside. "She is anxious; and she questions her step-daughter in that pretty, childlike manner which has such a bewitching air of innocent frivolity. Poor little creature; poor unhappy little golden-haired sinner; the battle between us seems terribly unfair. Why doesn't she run away while there is still time? I have given her fair warning, I have shown her my cards, and worked openly enough in this business, Heaven knows. Why doesn't she run away?"

He repeated this question again and again as he filled and emptied his meerschaum, surrounding himself



with the blue vapour from his pipe until he looked like some modern magician, seated in his laboratory.

"Why doesn't she run away? I would bring no needless shame upon that house, of all other houses upon this wide earth. I would only do my duty to my missing friend, and to that brave and generous man who has pledged his faith to a worthless woman. Heaven knows I have no wish to punish. Heaven knows I was never born to be the avenger of guilt or the persecutor of the guilty. I only wish to do my duty. I will give her one more warning, a full and fair one, and then ——"

His thoughts wandered away to that gloomy prospect in which he saw no gleam of brightness to relieve the dull, black obscurity that encompassed the future, shutting in his pathway on every side, and spreading a dense curtain around and about him, which Hope was powerless to penetrate. He was for ever haunted by the vision of his uncle's anguish, for ever tortured by the thought of that ruin and desolation, which, being brought about by his instrumentality, would seem in a manner his handiwork. But amid all, and through all, Clara Talboys, with an imperious gesture, beckoned him onwards to her brother's unknown grave.

"Shall I go down to Southampton," he thought, "and endeavour to discover the history of the woman who died at Ventnor? Shall I work underground, bribing the paltry assistants in that foul conspiracy, until I find my way to the thrice guilty principal? No! not till I have tried other means of discovering



the truth. Shall I go to that miserable old man, and charge him with his share in the shameful trick which I believe to have been played upon my poor friend? No; I will not torture that terror-stricken wretch as I tortured him a few weeks ago. I will go straight to the arch conspirator, and will tear away the beautiful veil under which she hides her wickedness, and will wring from her the secret of my friend's fate and banish her for ever from the house which her presence has polluted."

He started early the next morning for Essex, and reached Audley before eleven o'clock.

Early as it was, my lady was out. She had gone to Chelmsford upon a shopping expedition with her step-daughter. She had several calls to make the neighbourhood of the town, and was not likely to return until dinner-time. Sir Michael's health was very much improved, and he would come down-stairs in the afternoon. Would Mr. Audley go to his uncle's room?

No; Robert had no wish to meet that generous kinsman. What could he say to him? How could he smooth the way to the trouble that was to come? — how soften the cruel blow of the great grief that was preparing for that noble and trusting heart?

"If I could forgive her the wrong done to my friend," Robert thought, "I should still abhor her for the misery her guilt must bring upon the man who has believed in her."

He told his uncle's servant that he would stroll



into the village, and return before dinner. He walked slowly away from the Court, wandering across the meadows between his uncle's house and the village, purposeless and indifferent, with the great trouble and perplexity of his life stamped upon his face and reflected in his manner.

"I will go into the churchyard," he thought, "and stare at the tombstones. There is nothing I can do that will make me more gloomy than I am."

He was in those very meadows through which he had hurried from Audley Court to the station upon the September day in which George Talboys had disappeared. He looked at the pathway by which he had gone upon that day, and remembered his unaccustomed hurry, and the vague feeling of terror which had taken possession of him immediately upon losing sight of his friend.

"Why did that unaccountable terror seize upon me?" he thought. "Why was it that I saw some strange mystery in my friend's disappearance? Was it a monition or a monomania? What if I am wrong after all? What if this chain of evidence which I have constructed link by link, is woven out of my own folly? What if this edifice of horror and suspicion is a mere collection of crotchets — the nervous fancies of a hypochondriacal bachelor? Mr. Harcourt Talboys sees no meaning in the events out of which I have created a horrible mystery. I lay the separate links of the chain before him, and he cannot recognise their fitness. He is unable to put them together. Oh, my God, if it



should be in myself all this time that the misery lies; if —" he smiled bitterly, and shook his head. "I have the handwriting in my pocket-book which is the evidence of the conspiracy," he thought. "It remains for me to discover the darker half of my lady's secret."

He avoided the village, still keeping to the meadows. The church lay a little way back from the straggling High Street, and a rough wooden gate opened from the churchyard into a broad meadow, that was bordered by a running stream, and sloped down into a grassy valley dotted by groups of cattle.

Robert slowly ascended the narrow hill-side pathway leading up to the gate in the churchyard. The quiet dulness of the lonely landscape harmonised with his own gloom. The solitary figure of an old man hobbling towards a stile at the further end of the wide meadow was the only human creature visible upon the area over which the young barrister looked. The smoke slowly ascending from the scattered houses in the long High Street was the only evidence of human life. The slow progress of the hands of the old clock in the church steeple was the only token by which a traveller could perceive that the sluggish course of rural time had not come to a full stop in the village of Audley.

Yes, there was one other sign. As Robert opened the gate of the churchyard, and strolled listlessly into the little enclosure, he became aware of the solemn



music of an organ, audible through a half-open window in the steeple.

He stopped and listened to the slow harmonies of a dreamy melody that sounded like an extempore composition of an accomplished player.

"Who would have believed that Audley church could boast such an organ?" thought Robert. "When last I was here, the national schoolmaster used to accompany his children by a primitive performance of common chords. I didn't think the old organ had such music in it."

He lingered at the gate, not caring to break the lazy spell woven about him by the monotonous melancholy of the organist's performance. The tones of the instrument, now swelling to their fullest power, now sinking to a low, whispering softness, floated towards him upon the misty winter atmosphere, and had a soothing influence, that seemed to comfort him in his trouble.

He closed the gate softly, and crossed the little patch of gravel before the door of the church. This door had been left ajar — by the organist, perhaps. Robert Audley pushed it open, and walked into the square porch, from which a flight of narrow stone steps wound upwards to the organ-loft and the belfry. Mr. Audley took off his hat, and opened the door between the porch and the body of the church. He stepped softly into the holy edifice, which had a damp, mouldy smell upon week-days. He walked down the narrow aisle to the altar-rails, and from that point



of observation took a survey of the church. The little gallery was exactly opposite to him, but the scanty green curtains before the organ were closely drawn, and he could not get a glimpse of the player.

The music still rolled on. The organist had wandered into a melody of Mendelssohn's, a strain whose dreamy sadness went straight to Robert's heart. He loitered in the nooks and corners of the church, examining the dilapidated memorials of the well-nigh forgotten dead, and listening to this music.

"If my poor friend, George Talboys, had died in my arms, and I had buried him in this quiet church, in one of the vaults over which I tread to-day, how much anguish of mind, vacillation, and torment I might have escaped," thought Robert Audley, as he read the faded inscriptions upon tablets of discoloured marble: "I should have known his fate — I should have known his fate! Ah, how much there would have been in that. It is this miserable uncertainty, this horrible suspicion, which has poisoned my very life."

He looked at his watch.

"Half-past one," he muttered. "I shall have to wait four or five dreary hours before my lady comes home from her morning calls. Her morning calls — her pretty visits of ceremony or friendliness. Good heavens! what an actress this woman is. What an arch trickster — what an all-accomplished deceiver. But she shall play her pretty comedy no longer under my uncle's roof. I have diplomatised long enough. She has re-



fused to accept an indirect warning. To-night I will speak plainly."

The music of the organ ceased, and Robert heard the closing of the instrument.

"I'll have a look at this new organist," he thought, "who can afford to bury his talents at Audley, and play Mendelssohn's finest fugues for a stipend of sixteen pounds a-year." He lingered in the porch, waiting for the organist to descend the awkward little staircase. In the weary trouble of his mind, and with the prospect of getting through the five hours in the best way he could, Mr. Audley was glad to cultivate any diversion of thought, however idle. He therefore freely indulged his curiosity about the new organist.

The first person who appeared upon the steep stone steps was a boy in corduroy trousers and a dark linen smock-frock, who shambled down the stairs with a good deal of unnecessary clatter of his hobnailed shoes, and who was red in the face from the exertion of blowing the bellows of the old organ. Close behind this boy came a young lady, very plainly dressed in a black silk gown and a large grey shawl, who started and turned pale at the sight of Mr. Audley.

This young lady was Clara Talboys.

Of all people in the world she was the last whom Robert either expected or wished to see. She had told him that she was going to pay a visit to some friends who lived in Essex; but the county is a wide one, and the village of Audley one of the most obscure and least frequented spots in the whole of its extent. That the



sister of his lost friend should be here — here where she could watch his every action, and from those actions deduce the secret workings of his mind, tracing his doubts home to their object — made a complication of his difficulties that he could never have anticipated. It brought him back to that consciousness of his own helplessness, in which he had exclaimed —

“A hand that is stronger than my own is beckoning me onward on the dark road that leads to my lost friend’s unknown grave.”

Clara Talboys was the first to speak.

“You are surprised to see me here, Mr. Audley,” she said.

“Very much surprised.”

“I told you that I was coming to Essex. I left home the day before yesterday. I was leaving home when I received your telegraphic message. The friend with whom I am staying is Mrs. Martyn, the wife of the new rector of Mount Stanning. I came down this morning to see the village and church, and as Mrs. Martyn had to pay a visit to the schools with the curate and his wife, I stopped here and amused myself by trying the old organ. I was not aware till I came here that there was a village called Audley. The place takes its name from your family, I suppose?”

“I believe so,” Robert answered, wondering at the lady’s calmness, in contradistinction to his own embarrassment. “I have a vague recollection of hearing the story of some ancestor who was called Audley of Audley in the reign of Edward the Fourth. The tomb



inside the rails near the altar belongs to one of the knights of Audley, but I have never taken the trouble to remember his achievements. Are you going to wait here for your friends, Miss Talboys?"

"Yes; they are to return here for me after they have finished their rounds."

"And you go back to Mount Stanning with them this afternoon?"

"Yes."

Robert stood with his hat in his hand looking absently out at the tombstones and the low wall of the churchyard. Clara Talboys watched his pale face, haggard under the deepening shadow that had rested upon it so long.

"You have been ill since I saw you last, Mr. Audley," she said, in a low voice, that had the same melodious sadness as the notes of the old organ under her touch.

"No, I have not been ill; I have been only harassed, wearied by a hundred doubts and perplexities."

He was thinking as he spoke to her — "How much does she guess? how much does she suspect?"

He had told the story of George's disappearance and of his own suspicions, suppressing only the names of those concerned in the mystery; but what if this girl should fathom the slender disguise, and discover for herself that which he had chosen to withhold?

Her grave eyes were fixed upon his face, and he knew that she was trying to read the innermost secrets of his mind.



"What am I in her hands?" he thought. "What am I in the hands of this woman, who has my lost friend's face and the manner of Pallas Athenè? She reads my pitiful, vacillating soul, and plucks the thoughts out of my heart with the magic of her solemn brown eyes. How unequal the fight must be between us, and how can I ever hope to conquer against the strength of her beauty and her wisdom?"

Mr. Audley was clearing his throat preparatory to bidding his beautiful companion good morning, and making his escape from the thralldom of her presence into the lonely meadow outside the churchyard, when Clara Talboys arrested him by speaking upon that very subject which he was most anxious to avoid.

"You promised to write to me, Mr. Audley," she said, "if you made any discovery which carried you nearer to the mystery of my brother's disappearance. You have not written to me, and I imagine, therefore, that you have discovered nothing."

Robert Audley was silent for some moments. How could he answer this direct question?

"The chain of circumstantial evidence which unites the mystery of your brother's fate with the person whom I suspect," he said, after a pause, "is formed of very slight links. I think that I have added another link to that chain since I saw you in Dorsetshire."

"And you refuse to tell me what it is that you have discovered."

"Only until I have discovered more."



"I thought from your message that you were going to Wildernsea."

"I have been there."

"Indeed! It was there that you made some discovery, then?"

"It was," answered Robert. "You must remember, Miss Talboys, that the sole ground upon which my suspicions rest is the identity of two individuals who have no apparent connection — the identity of a person who is supposed to be dead with one who is living. The conspiracy of which I believe your brother to have been the victim hinges upon this. If his wife, Helen Talboys, died when the papers recorded her death — if the woman who lies buried in Ventnor churchyard was indeed the woman whose name is inscribed on the headstone of the grave — I have no case, I have no clue to the mystery of your brother's fate. I am about to put this to the test. I believe that I am now in a position to play a bold game, and I believe that I shall soon arrive at the truth."

He spoke in a low voice, and with a solemn emphasis that betrayed the intensity of his feeling. Miss Talboys stretched out her ungloved hand, and laid it in his own. The cold touch of that slender hand sent a shivering thrill through his frame.

"You will not suffer my brother's fate to remain a mystery, Mr. Audley," she said quietly. "I know that you will do your duty to your friend."

The rector's wife and her two companions entered the churchyard as Clara Talboys said this. Robert



Audley pressed the hand that rested in his own, and raised it to his lips.

"I am a lazy, good-for-nothing fellow, Miss Talboys," he said; "but if I could restore your brother George to life and happiness, I should care very little for any sacrifice of my own feeling. I fear that the most I can do is to fathom the secret of his fate; and in doing that I must sacrifice those who are dearer to me than myself."

He put on his hat and hurried away through the gateway leading into the field as Mrs. Martyn came up to the porch.

"Who is that handsome young man I caught *tête-à-tête* with you, Clara?" she asked, laughing.

"He is a Mr. Audley, a friend of my poor brother's."

"Indeed! He is some relation of Sir Michael Audley, I suppose?"

"Sir Michael Audley!"

"Yes, my dear; the most important personage in the parish of Audley. But we'll call at the Court in a day or two, and you shall see the baronet and his pretty young wife."

"His young wife!" repeated Clara Talboys, looking earnestly at her friend. "Has Sir Michael Audley lately married?"

"Yes. He was a widower for sixteen years, and married a penniless young governess about a year and a half ago. The story is quite romantic, and Lady Audley is considered the belle of the county. But



come, my dear Clara, the pony is tired of waiting for us, and we've a long drive before dinner."

Clara Talboys took her seat in the little basket-carriage which was waiting at the principal gate of the churchyard in the care of the boy who had blown the organ-bellows. Mrs. Martyn shook the reins, and the sturdy chestnut cob trotted off in the direction of Mount Stanning.

"Will you tell me more about this Lady Audley, Fanny?" Miss Talboys said, after a long pause. "I want to know all about her. Have you heard her maiden name?"

"Yes; she was a Miss Graham."

"And she is very pretty?"

"Yes, very, very pretty. Rather a childish beauty though, with large clear blue eyes, and pale golden ringlets, that fall in a feathery shower over her throat and shoulders."

Clara Talboys was silent. She did not ask any further questions about my lady.

She was thinking of a passage in that letter which George had written to her during his honeymoon — a passage in which he said: — "My childish little wife is watching me as I write this. Ah! how I wish you could see her, Clara! Her eyes are as blue and as clear as the skies on a bright summer's day, and her hair falls about her face like the pale golden halo you see round the head of a Madonna in an Italian picture."

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## CHAPTER IV.

In the Lime-Walk.

ROBERT AUDLEY was loitering upon the broad grass-plat in front of the Court as the carriage containing my lady and Alicia drove under the archway, and drew up at the low turret-door. Mr. Audley presented himself in time to hand the ladies out of the vehicle.

My lady looked very pretty in a delicate blue bonnet and the sables which her nephew had bought for her at St. Petersburg. She seemed very well pleased to see Robert, and smiled most bewitchingly as she gave him her exquisitely gloved little hand.

"So you have come back to us, truant?" she said, laughing. "And now that you have returned, we shall keep you prisoner. We won't let him run away again, will we, Alicia?"

Miss Audley gave her head a scornfull toss, that shook the heavy curls under her cavalier hat.

"I have nothing to do with the movements of so erratic an individual," she said. "Since Robert Audley has taken it into his head to conduct himself like some ghost-haunted hero in a German story, I have given up attempting to understand him."

Mr. Audley looked at his cousin with an expression of serio-comic perplexity. "She's a nice girl," he



thought, "but she's a nuisance. I don't know how it is, but she seems more a nuisance than she used to be."

He pulled his mustachios reflectively as he considered this question. His mind wandered away for a few moments from the great trouble of his life to dwell upon this minor perplexity.

"She's a dear girl," he thought; "a generous-hearted, bouncing, noble English lassie, and yet —" He lost himself in a quagmire of doubt and difficulty. There was some hitch in his mind which he could not understand; some change in himself, beyond the change made in him by his anxiety about George Talboys, which mystified and bewildered him.

"And pray where have you been wandering during the last day or two, Mr. Audley?" asked my lady, as she lingered with her step-daughter upon the threshold of the turret door, waiting until Robert should be pleased to stand aside and allow them to pass. The young man started as she asked this question and looked up at her suddenly. Something in the aspect of her bright young beauty, something in the childish innocence of her expression, seemed to smite him to the heart, and his face grew pale as he looked at her.

"I have been — in Yorkshire," he said; "at the little watering place where my poor friend George Talboys lived at the time of his marriage."

The white change in my lady's face was the only sign of her having heard these words. She smiled, a



faint, sickly smile, and tried to pass her husband's nephew.

"I must dress for dinner," she said. "I am going to a dinner-party, Mr. Audley; please let me go in."

"I must ask you to spare me half-an-hour, Lady Audley," Robert answered, in a low voice. "I came down to Essex on purpose to speak to you."

"What about?" asked my lady.

She had recovered herself from any shock which she might have sustained a few moments before, and it was in her usual manner that she asked this question. Her face expressed the mingled bewilderment and curiosity of a puzzled child, rather than the serious surprise of a woman.

"What can you want to talk to me about, Mr. Audley?" she repeated.

"I will tell you when we are alone," Robert said, glancing at his cousin, who stood a little way behind my lady, watching this confidential little dialogue.

"He is in love with my step-mother's wax-doll beauty," thought Alicia, "and it is for her sake he has become such a disconsolate object. He's just the sort of person to fall in love with his aunt."

Miss Audley walked away to the grass-plat, turning her back upon Robert and my lady.

"The absurd creature turned as white as a sheet when he saw her," she thought, "So he can be in love, after all. That slow lump of torpidity he calls his heart can beat, I suppose, once in a quarter of a century: but it seems that nothing but a blue-eyed



wax-doll can set it going. I should have given him up long ago if I'd known that his ideal of beauty was to be found in a toyshop."

Poor Alicia crossed the grass-plat and disappeared upon the opposite side of the quadrangle, where there was a Gothic gate that communicated with the stables. I am sorry to say that Sir Michael Audley's daughter went to seek consolation from her dog Cæsar and her chestnut mare Atalanta, whose loose box the young lady was in the habit of visiting every day.

"Will you come into the lime-walk, Lady Audley?" said Robert, as his cousin left the garden. "I wish to talk to you without fear of interruption or observation. I think we could choose no safer place than that. Will you come there with me?"

"If you please," answered my lady. Mr. Audley could see that she was trembling, and that she glanced from side to side, as if looking for some outlet by which she might escape him.

"You are shivering, Lady Audley," he said.

"Yes, I am very cold. I would rather speak to you some other day, please. Let it be to-morrow, if you will. I have to dress for dinner, and I want to see Sir Michael; I have not seen him since ten o'clock this morning. Please let it be to-morrow."

There was a painful piteousness in her tone. Heaven knows how painful to Robert's heart. Heaven knows what horrible images arose in his mind as he looked down at that fair young face and thought of the task that lay before him.



"I *must* speak to you, Lady Audley," he said. "If I am cruel, it is you who have made me cruel. You might have escaped this ordeal. You might have avoided me. I gave you fair warning. But you have chosen to defy me, and it is your own folly which is to blame if I no longer spare you. Come with me. I tell you again I must speak to you."

There was a cold determination in his tone which silenced my lady's objections. She followed him submissively to the little iron gate which communicated with the long garden behind the house — the garden in which a little rustic wooden bridge led across the quiet fish-pond into the lime-walk.

The early winter twilight was closing in, and the intricate tracery of the leafless branches that overarched the lonely pathway looked black against the cold grey of the evening sky. The lime-walk seemed like some cloister in this uncertain light.

"Why do you bring me to this horrible place to frighten me out of my poor wits?" cried my lady. peevishly. "You ought to know how nervous I am."

"You are nervous, my lady?"

"Yes, dreadfully nervous. I am worth a fortune to poor Mr. Dawson. He is always sending me camphor, and sal volatile, and red lavender, and all kinds of abominable mixtures, but he can't cure me."

"Do you remember what Macbeth tells his physician, my lady?" asked Robert, gravely. "Mr. Dawson may be very much more clever than the Scottish leech;



but I doubt if even *he* can minister to the mind that is diseased."

"Who said that my mind was diseased?" exclaimed Lady Audley.

"I say so, my lady," answered Robert. "You tell me that you are nervous, and that all the medicines your doctor can prescribe are only so much physic that might as well be thrown to the dogs. Let me be the physician to strike to the root of your malady, Lady Audley. Heaven knows that I wish to be merciful — that I would spare you as far as it is in my power to spare you in doing justice to others — but justice must be done. Shall I tell you why you are nervous in this house, my lady?"

"If you can," she answered, with a little laugh.

"Because for you this house is haunted."

"Haunted?"

"Yes, haunted by the ghost of George Talboys."

Robert Audley heard my lady's quickened breathing, he fancied he could almost hear the loud beating of her heart as she walked by his side, shivering now and then, and with her sable cloak wrapped tightly round her.

"What do you mean?" she cried suddenly, after a pause of some moments. "Why do you torment me about this George Talboys, who happens to have taken it into his head to keep out of your way for a few months? Are you going mad, Mr. Audley, and do you select me as the victim of your monomania? What



is George Talboys to me that you should worry me about him?"

"He was a stranger to you, my lady, was he not?"

"Of course!" answered Lady Audley. "What should he be but a stranger?"

"Shall I tell you the story of my friend's disappearance as I read that story, my lady?" asked Robert.

"No," cried Lady Audley; "I wish to know nothing of your friend. If he is dead I am sorry for him. If he lives, I have no wish either to see him or to hear of him. Let me go in to see my husband, if you please, Mr. Audley; unless you wish to detain me in this gloomy place until I catch my death of cold."

"I wish to detain you until you have heard what I have to say, Lady Audley," answered Robert, resolutely. "I will detain you no longer than is necessary; and when you have heard me, you shall choose your own course of action."

"Very well, then; pray lose no time in saying what you have to say," replied my lady, carelessly. "I promise to attend very patiently."

"When my friend George Talboys returned to England," Robert began gravely, "the thought which was uppermost in his mind was the thought of his wife."

"Whom he had deserted," said my lady quickly. "At least," she added, more deliberately, "I remember your telling us something to that effect when you first told us your friend's story."

Robert Audley did not notice this interruption.



"The thought that was uppermost in his mind was the thought of his wife," he repeated. "His fairest hope in the future was the hope of making her happy, and lavishing upon her the fortune which he had won by the force of his own strong arm in the gold-fields of Australia. I saw him within a few hours of his reaching England, and I was a witness of the joyful pride with which he looked forward to his reunion with his wife. I was also a witness of the blow which struck him to the very heart — which changed him from the man he had been, to a creature as unlike that former self as one human being can be unlike another. The blow which made that cruel change was the announcement of his wife's death in the *Times* newspaper. I now believe that that announcement was a black and bitter lie."

"Indeed!" said my lady; "and what reason could any one have for announcing the death of Mrs. Talboys, if Mrs. Talboys had been alive?"

"The lady herself might have had a reason," Robert answered, quietly.

"What reason?"

"How if she had taken advantage of George's absence to win a richer husband? How if she had married again, and wished to throw my poor friend off the scent by this false announcement?"

Lady Audley shrugged her shoulders.

"Your suppositions are rather ridiculous, Mr. Audley," she said; "it is to be hoped that you have some reasonable grounds for them."



"I have examined a file of each of the newspapers published in Chelmsford and Colchester," continued Robert, without replying to my lady's last observation, "and I find in one of the Colchester papers, dated July the 2nd, 1857, a brief paragraph amongst numerous miscellaneous scraps of information copied from other newspapers, to the effect that a Mr. George Talboys, an English gentleman, had arrived at Sydney from the gold-fields, carrying with him nuggets and gold-dust to the amount of twenty thousand pounds, and that he had realised his property and sailed for Liverpool in the fast-sailing clipper *Argus*. This is a very small fact of course, Lady Audley, but it is enough to prove that any person residing in Essex in the July of the year fifty-seven, was likely to become aware of George Talboys' return from Australia. Do you follow me?"

"Not very clearly," said my lady. "What have the Essex papers to do with the death of Mrs. Talboys?"

"We will come to that by-and-by, Lady Audley. I say that I believe the announcement in the *Times* to have been a false announcement, and a part of the conspiracy which was carried out by Helen Talboys and Lieutenant Maldon against my poor friend."

"A conspiracy!"

"Yes, a conspiracy concocted by an artful woman, who had speculated upon the chances of her husband's death, and had secured a splendid position at the risk of committing a crime; a bold woman, my lady, who thought to play her comedy out to the end without



fear of detection; a wicked woman, who did not care what misery she might inflict upon the honest heart of the man she betrayed; but a foolish woman, who looked at life as a game of chance, in which the best player was likely to hold the winning cards, forgetting that there is a Providence above the pitiful speculators, and that wicked secrets are never permitted to remain long hidden. If this woman of whom I speak had never been guilty of any blacker sin than the publication of that lying announcement in the *Times* newspaper, I should still hold her as the most detestable of her sex — the most pitiless and calculating of human creatures. That cruel lie was a base and cowardly blow in the dark; it was the treacherous dagger-thrust of an infamous assassin."

"But how do you know that the announcement was a false one?" asked my lady. "You told us that you had been to Ventnor with Mr. Talboys to see his wife's grave. Who was it who died at Ventnor if it was not Mrs. Talboys?"

"Ah, Lady Audley," said Robert, "that is a question which only two or three people can answer, and one or other of those persons shall answer it to me before very long. I tell you, my lady, that I am determined to unravel the mystery of George Talboys' death. Do you think I am to be put off by feminine prevarication — by womanly trickery? No! Link by link I have put together the chain of evidence, which wants but a link here and there to be complete in its terrible strength. Do you think I will suffer myself to



be baffled? Do you think I shall fail to discover those missing links? No, Lady Audley, I shall not fail, for *I know where to look for them!* There is a fair-haired woman at Southampton — a woman called Plowson, who has some share in the secrets of the father of my friend's wife. I have an idea that she can help me to discover the history of the woman who lies buried in Ventnor churchyard, and I will spare no trouble in making that discovery; unless — ”

“Unless what?” asked my lady, eagerly.

“Unless the woman I wish to save from degradation and punishment accepts the mercy I offer her, and takes warning while there is still time.”

My lady shrugged her graceful shoulders, and flashed bright defiance out of her blue eyes.

“She would be a very foolish woman if she suffered herself to be influenced by any such absurdity,” she said. “You are hypochondriacal, Mr. Audley, and you must take camphor, or red lavender, or sal volatile. What can be more ridiculous than this idea which you have taken into your head? You lose your friend George Talboys in rather a mysterious manner — that is to say, that gentleman chooses to leave England without giving you due notice. What of that? You confess that he became an altered man after his wife's death. He grew eccentric and misanthropical; he affected an utter indifference as to what became of him. What more likely, then, that he grew tired of the monotony of civilised life, and ran away to those savage gold-fields to find a distraction for his grief?



It is rather a romantic story, but by no means an uncommon one. But you are not satisfied with this simple interpretation of your friend's disappearance, and you build up some absurd theory of a conspiracy which has no existence except in your own overheated brain. Helen Talboys is dead. The *Times* newspaper declares she is dead. Her own father tells you that she is dead. The headstone of the grave in Ventnor churchyard bears record of her death. By what right," cried my lady, her voice rising to that shrill and piercing tone peculiar to her when affected by any intense agitation — "by what right, Mr. Audley, do you come to me and torment me about George Talboys — by what right do you dare to say that his wife is still alive?"

"By the right of circumstantial evidence, Lady Audley," answered Robert — "by the right of that circumstantial evidence which will sometimes fix the guilt of a man's murder upon that person who, on the first hearing of the case, seems of all other men the most unlikely to be guilty."

"What circumstantial evidence?"

"The evidence of time and place. The evidence of handwriting. When Helen Talboys left her father's house at Wildernsea, she left a letter behind her — a letter in which she declared that she was weary of her old life, and that she wished to seek a new home and a new fortune. That letter is in my possession."

"Indeed."

"Shall I tell you *whose* handwriting resembles that



of Helen Talboys so closely, that the most dexterous expert could perceive no distinction between the two?"

"A resemblance between the handwriting of two women is no very uncommon circumstance now-a-days," replied my lady, carelessly. "I could show you the caligraphies of half-a-dozen of my female correspondents, and defy you to discover any great differences in them."

"But what if the handwriting is a very uncommon one, presenting marked peculiarities by which it may be recognised among a hundred?"

"Why, in that case the coincidence is rather curious," answered my lady; "but it is nothing more than a coincidence. You cannot deny the fact of Helen Talboy's death on the ground that her handwriting resembles that of some surviving person."

"But if a series of such coincidences lead up to the same point," said Robert. "Helen Talboys left her father's house, according to the declaration in her own handwriting, because she was weary of her old life, and wished to begin a new one. Do you know what I infer from this?"

My lady shrugged her shoulders.

"I have not the least idea," she said; "and as you have detained me in this gloomy place nearly half-an-hour, I must beg that you will release me, and let me go and dress for dinner."

"No, Lady Audley," answered Robert, with a cold sternness that was so strange to him as to transform him into another creature — a pitiless embodiment of



justice, a cruel instrument of retribution — “no, Lady Audley,” he repeated, “I have told you that womanly prevarication will not help you; I tell you now that defiance will not serve you. I have dealt fairly with you, and have given you fair warning. I gave you indirect notice of your danger two months ago.”

“What do you mean?” asked my lady, suddenly.

“You did not choose to take that warning, Lady Audley,” pursued Robert, “and the time has come in which I must speak very plainly to you. Do you think the gifts which you have played against fortune are to hold you exempt from retribution? No, my lady, your youth and beauty, your grace and refinement, only make the horrible secret of your life more horrible. I tell you that the evidence against you wants only one link to be strong enough for your condemnation, and that link shall be added. Helen Talboys never returned to her father’s house. When she deserted that poor old father, she went away from his humble shelter with the declared intention of washing her hands of that old life. What do people generally do when they wish to begin a new existence — to start for a second time in the race of life, free from the encumbrances that had fettered their first journey? *They change their names*, Lady Audley. Helen Talboys deserted her infant son — she went away from Wildernsea with the predetermination of sinking her identity. She disappeared as Helen Talboys upon the 16th of August, 1854, and upon the 17th of that month she reappeared as Lucy Graham, the friendless



girl who undertook a profitless duty in consideration of a home in which she was asked no questions."

"You are mad, Mr. Audley!" cried my lady. "You are mad, and my husband shall protect me from your insolence. What if this Helen Talboys ran away from her home upon one day, and I entered my employer's house upon the next, what does that prove?"

"By itself, very little," replied Robert Audley; "but with the help of other evidence —"

"What evidence?"

"The evidence of two labels, pasted one over the other, upon a box left by you in the possession of Mrs. Vincent, the upper label bearing the name of Miss Graham, the lower that of Mrs. George Talboys."

My lady was silent. Robert Audley could not see her face in the dusk, but he could see that her two small hands were clasped convulsively over her heart, and he knew that the shot had gone home to its mark.

"God help her, poor, wretched creature," he thought. "She knows now that she is lost. I wonder if the judges of the land feel as I do now, when they put on the black cap, and pass sentence of death upon some poor, shivering wretch who has never done them any wrong. Do they feel a heroic fervour of virtuous indignation, or do they suffer this dull anguish which gnaws my vitals as I talk to this helpless woman?"

He walked by my lady's side, silently, for some minutes. They had been pacing up and down the dim avenue, and they were now drawing near the leafless shrubbery at one end of the lime-walk — the shrubbery



in which the ruined well sheltered its unheeded decay among the tangled masses of briery underwood.

A winding pathway, neglected and half-choked with weeds, led towards this well. Robert left the lime-walk, and struck into this pathway. There was more light in the shrubbery than in the avenue, and Mr. Audley wished to see my lady's face.

He did not speak until they reached the patch of rank grass beside the well. The massive brickwork had fallen away here and there, and loose fragments of masonry lay buried amidst weeds and briars. The heavy posts which had supported the wooden roller still remained, but the iron spindle had been dragged from its socket, and lay a few paces from the well, rusty, discoloured, and forgotten.

Robert Audley leant against one of the moss-grown posts and looked down at my lady's face, very pale in the chill winter twilight. The moon had newly risen, a feebly luminous crescent in the grey heavens, and a faint, ghostly light mingled with the misty shadows of the declining day. My lady's face seemed like that face which Robert Audley had seen in his dreams looking out of the white foam flakes on the green sea waves and luring his uncle to destruction.

"Those two labels are in my possession, Lady Audley," he resumed. "I took them from the box left by you at Crescent Villas. I took them in the presence of Mrs. Vincent and Miss Tonks. Have you any proof to offer against this evidence? You say to me, 'I am Lucy Graham, and I have nothing whatever to do with



Helen Talboys.' In that case, you can produce witnesses who will declare your antecedents. Where had you been living prior to your appearance at Crescent Villas? You must have friends, relations, connections, who can come forward to prove as much as this for you. If you were the most desolate creature upon this earth, you would be able to point to some one who could identify you with the past."

"Yes," cried my lady, "if I were placed in a criminal dock, I could, no doubt, bring forward witnesses to refute your absurd accusation. But I am not in a criminal dock, Mr. Audley, and I do not choose to do anything but laugh at your ridiculous folly. I tell you that you are mad! If you please to say that Helen Talboys is not dead, and that I am Helen Talboys, you may do so. If you choose to go wandering about to the places in which I have lived, and to the places in which this Mrs. Talboys has lived, you must follow the bent of your own inclination; but I would warn you that such fancies have sometimes conducted people as apparently sane as yourself, to the life-long imprisonment of a private lunatic asylum."

Robert Audley started, and recoiled a few paces among the weeds and brushwood as my lady said this.

"She would be capable of any new crime to shield her from the consequences of the old one," he thought. "She would be capable of using her influence with my uncle to place me in a mad-house."

I do not say that Robert Audley was a coward, but I will admit that a shiver of horror, something akin



to fear, chilled him to the heart, as he remembered the horrible things that have been done by women, since that day upon which Eve was created to be Adam's companion and help-meet in the garden of Eden. What if this woman's hellish power of dissimulation should be stronger than the truth, and crush him? She had not spared George Talboys when he had stood in her way, and menaced her with a certain peril; would she spare him who threatened her with a far greater danger? Are women merciful, or loving, or kind in proportion to their beauty and their grace? Was there not a certain Monsieur Mazers de Latude, who had the bad fortune to offend the all-accomplished Madame de Pompadour, who expiated his youthful indiscretion by a life-long imprisonment; who twice escaped from prison, to be twice cast back into captivity; who, trusting in the tardy generosity of his beautiful foe, betrayed himself to an implacable fiend? Robert Audley looked at the pale face of the woman standing by his side: that fair and beautiful face, illumined by starry blue eyes, that had a strange and surely a dangerous light in them; and remembering a hundred stories of womanly perfidy, shuddered as he thought how unequal the struggle might be between himself and his uncle's wife.

"I have shown her my cards," he thought, "but she has kept hers hidden from me. The mask that she wears is not to be plucked away. My uncle would rather think me mad than believe her guilty."

The pale face of Clara Talboys — that grave and



earnest face, so different in its character to my lady's fragile beauty — arose before him.

"What a coward I am to think of myself or my own danger," he thought. "The more I see of this woman, the more reason I have to dread her influence upon others; the more reason to wish her far away from this house."

He looked about him in the dusky obscurity. The lonely garden was as quiet as some solitary graveyard, walled in and hidden away from the world of the living.

"It was somewhere in this garden that she met George Talboys upon the day of his disappearance," he thought. "I wonder where it was they met; I wonder where it was that he looked into her cruel face, and taxed her with her falsehood."

My lady, with her little hand resting lightly upon the opposite post to that against which Robert leant, toyed with her pretty foot amongst the long weeds, but kept a furtive watch upon her enemy's face.

"It is to be a duel to the death, then, my lady," said Robert Audley, solemnly. "You refuse to accept my warning. You refuse to run away and repent of your wickedness in some foreign place, far from the generous gentleman you have deceived and fooled by your false witcheries. You choose to remain here and defy me."

"I do," answered Lady Audley, lifting her head, and looking full at the young barrister. "It is no



fault of mine if my husband's nephew goes mad, and chooses me for the victim of his monomania."

"So be it, then, my lady," answered Robert. "My friend George Talboys was last seen entering these gardens by the little iron gate at which we came in to-night. He was last heard inquiring for you. He was seen to enter these gardens, but he was never seen to leave them. I do not believe that he ever did leave them. I believe that he met with his death within the boundary of these grounds; and that his body lies hidden below some quiet water, or in some forgotten corner of this place. I will have such a search made as shall level that house to the earth, and root up every tree in these gardens, rather than I will fail in finding the grave of my murdered friend."

Lucy Audley uttered a long, low, wailing cry, and threw up her arms above her head with a wild gesture of despair, but she made no answer to the ghastly charge of her accuser. Her arms slowly dropped, and she stood staring at Robert Audley, her white face gleaming through the dusk, her blue eyes glittering and dilated.

"You shall never live to do this," she said. "*I will kill you first.* Why have you tormented me so? Why could you not let me alone? What harm had I ever done *you* that you should make yourself my persecutor, and dog my steps, and watch my looks, and play the spy upon me? Do you want to drive me mad? Do you know what it is to wrestle with a madwoman?



"No," cried my lady, with a laugh, "you do not, or you would never — —"

She stopped abruptly, and drew herself suddenly to her fullest height. It was the same action which Robert had seen in the old half-drunken lieutenant; and it had that same dignity — the sublimity of extreme misery.

"Go away, Mr. Audley," she said. "You are mad, I tell you; you are mad."

"I am going, my lady," answered Robert, quietly. "I would have condoned your crimes out of pity to your wretchedness. You have refused to accept my mercy. I wished to have pity upon the living. I shall henceforth only remember my duty to the dead."

He walked away from the lonely well under the shadow of the limes. My lady followed him slowly down that long, gloomy avenue, and across the rustic bridge to the iron gate. As he passed through the gate, Alicia came out of a little half-glass door that opened from an oak-panelled breakfast-room at one angle of the house, and met her cousin upon the threshold of the gateway.

"I have been looking for you everywhere, Robert," she said. "Papa has come down to the library, and I'm sure he will be glad to see you."

The young man started at the sound of his cousin's fresh young voice. "Good heavens!" he thought, "can these two women be of the same clay? Can this frank, generous-hearted girl, who cannot conceal any impulse of her innocent nature, be of the same flesh and blood



as that wretched creature whose shadow falls upon the path beside me?"

He looked from his cousin to Lady Audley, who stood near the gateway, waiting for him to stand aside and let her pass him.

"I don't know what has come to your cousin, my dear Alicia," said my lady. "He is so absent-minded and eccentric, as to be quite beyond my comprehension."

"Indeed," exclaimed Miss Audley; "and yet I should imagine, from the length of your *tête-à-tête*, that you had made some effort to understand him."

"Oh, yes," said Robert, quietly, "my lady and I understand each other very well; but as it is growing late I will wish you good evening, ladies. I shall sleep to-night at Mount Stanning, as I have some business to attend to up there, and I will come down and see my uncle to-morrow."

"What, Robert!" cried Alicia, "you surely won't go away without seeing papa?"

"Yes, my dear," answered the young man. "I am a little disturbed by some disagreeable business in which I am very much concerned, and I would rather not see my uncle. Good night, Alicia. I will come or write to-morrow."

He pressed his cousin's hand, bowed to Lady Audley, and walked away under the black shadows of the archway, and out into the quiet avenue beyond the Court.



My lady and Alicia stood watching him until he was out of sight.

"What in goodness' name is the matter with my cousin Robert?" exclaimed Miss Audley, impatiently, as the barrister disappeared. "What does he mean by these absurd goings-on? Some disagreeable business that disturbs him, indeed! I suppose the unhappy creature has had a brief forced upon him by some evil-starred attorney, and is sinking into a state of imbecility from a dim consciousness of his own incompetence."

"Have you ever studied your cousin's character, Alicia?" asked my lady, very seriously, after a pause.

"Studied his character! No, Lady Audley. Why should I study his character?" said Alicia. "There is very little study required to convince anybody that he is a lazy, selfish Sybarite, who cares for nothing in the world except his own ease and comfort."

"But have you never thought him eccentric?"

"Eccentric!" repeated Alicia, pursing up her red lips and shrugging her shoulders. "Well, yes — I believe that is the excuse generally made for such people. I suppose Bob *is* eccentric."

"I have never heard you speak of his father and mother," said my lady, thoughtfully. "Do you remember them?"

"I never saw his mother. She was a Miss Dalrymple, a very dashing girl, who ran away with my uncle, and lost a very handsome fortune in consequence.



She died at Nice when poor Bob was five years old."

"Did you ever hear anything particular about her?"

"How do you mean, 'particular'?" asked Alicia.

"Did you ever hear that she was eccentric — what people call 'odd'?"

"Oh, no," said Alicia, laughing. "My aunt was a very reasonable woman, I believe, though she did marry for love. But you must remember that she died before I was born, and I have not, therefore, felt very much curiosity about her."

"But you recollect your uncle, I suppose?"

"My uncle Robert?" said Alicia. "Oh, yes, I remember him very well indeed."

"Was *he* eccentric — I mean to say, peculiar in his habits, like your cousin?"

"Yes, I believe Robert inherits all his absurdities from his father. My uncle expressed the same indifference for his fellow-creatures as my cousin; but as he was a good husband, an affectionate father, and a kind master, nobody ever challenged his opinions."

"But he *was* eccentric?"

"Yes; I suppose he was generally thought a little eccentric."

"Ah," said my lady gravely, "I thought as much. Do you know, Alicia, that madness is more often transmitted from father to son than from father to daughter, and from mother to daughter than from mother to son? Your cousin Robert Audley is a very



handsome young man, and I believe a very good-hearted young man; but he must be watched, Alicia, for he is *mad!*”

“Mad!” cried Miss Audley, indignantly; “you are dreaming, my lady, or — or — you are trying to frighten me,” added the young lady, with considerable alarm.

“I only wish to put you on your guard, Alicia,” answered my lady. “Mr. Audley may be as you say, merely eccentric; but he has talked to me this evening in a manner that has filled me with absolute terror, and I believe that he is going mad. I shall speak very seriously to Sir Michael this very night.”

“Speak to papa!” exclaimed Alicia; “you surely won’t distress papa by suggesting such a possibility!”

“I shall only put him on his guard, my dear Alicia.”

“But he’ll never believe you,” said Miss Audley; “he will laugh at such an idea.”

“No, Alicia; he will believe anything that I tell him,” answered my lady, with a quiet smile.

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## CHAPTER V.

## Preparing the Ground.

LADY AUDLEY went from the garden to the library, a pleasant oak-panelled homely apartment in which Sir Michael liked to sit reading or writing, or arranging the business of his estate with his steward, a stalwart countryman, half agriculturist, half lawyer, who rented a small farm a few miles from the Court.

The baronet was seated in a capacious easychair near the hearth. The bright blaze of the fire rose and fell, flashing now upon the polished prominences of the black-oak bookcase, now upon the gold and scarlet bindings of the books; sometimes glimmering upon the Athenian helmet of a marble Pallas, sometimes lighting up the forehead of Sir Robert Peel.

The lamp upon the reading-table had not yet been lighted, and Sir Michael sat in the firelight waiting for the coming of his young wife.

It is impossible for me ever to tell the purity of his generous love—it is impossible to describe that affection which was as tender as the love of a young mother for her first-born, as brave and chivalrous as the heroic passion of a Bayard for his liege mistress.

The door opened while he was thinking of this fondly-loved wife, and looking up, the baronet saw the slender form standing in the doorway.



"Why, my darling!" he exclaimed, as my lady closed the door behind her, and came towards his chair, "I have been thinking of you, and waiting for you for an hour. Where have you been, and what have you been doing?"

My lady, standing in the shadow rather than in the light, paused a few moments before replying to this question.

"I have been to Chelmsford," she said, "shopping; and —"

She hesitated — twisting her bonnet-strings in her thin white fingers with an air of pretty embarrassment.

"And what, my dear," asked the baronet — "what have you been doing since you came from Chelmsford? I heard a carriage stop at the door an hour ago. It was yours, was it not?"

"Yes, I came home an hour ago," answered my lady, with the same air of embarrassment.

"And what have you been doing since you came home?"

Sir Michael Audley asked this question with a slightly reproachful accent. His young wife's presence made the sunshine of his life, and though he could not bear to chain her to his side, it grieved him to think that she could willingly remain unnecessarily absent from him frittering away her time in some childish talk or frivolous occupation.

"What have you been doing since you came home,



my dear?" he repeated. "What has kept you so long away from me?"

"I have been talking — to — Mr. Robert Audley."

She still twisted her bonnet-string round and round her fingers. She still spoke with the same air of embarrassment.

"Robert!" exclaimed the baronet; "is Robert here?"

"He was here a little while ago."

"And is here still, I suppose?"

"No, he has gone away."

"Gone away!" cried Sir Michael. "What do you mean, my darling?"

"I mean that your nephew came to the Court this afternoon. Alicia and I found him idling about the gardens. He stayed here till about a quarter of an hour ago talking to me, and then he hurried off, without a word of explanation, except, indeed, some ridiculous excuse about business at Mount Stanning."

"Business at Mount Stanning! Why, what business can he possibly have in that out-of-the-way place? He has gone to sleep at Mount Stanning, then, I suppose?"

"Yes, I think he said something to that effect."

"Upon my word," exclaimed the baronet, "I think that boy is half mad."

My lady's face was so much in shadow, that Sir Michael Audley was unaware of the bright change that came over its sickly pallor as he made this very common-place observation. A triumphant smile illu-



mined Lucy Audley's countenance, a smile that plainly said, "It is coming — it is coming; I can twist him which way I like. I can put black before him, and if I say it is white, he will believe me."

But Sir Michael Audley, in declaring that his nephew's wits were disordered, merely uttered that common-place ejaculation which is well known to have very little meaning. The baronet had, it is true, no very great estimate of Robert's faculty for the business of this every-day life. He was in the habit of looking upon his nephew as a good-natured nonentity — a man whose heart had been amply stocked by liberal nature with all the best things the generous goddess had to bestow, but whose brain had been somewhat overlooked in the distribution of intellectual gifts. Sir Michael Audley made that mistake which is very commonly made by easy-going, well-to-do observers, who have no occasion to look below the surface. He mistook laziness for incapacity. He thought because his nephew was idle, he must necessarily be stupid. He concluded that if Robert did not distinguish himself it was because he could not.

He forgot the mute inglorious Miltons who die voiceless and inarticulate for want of that dogged perseverance, that blind courage, which the poet must possess before he can find a publisher; he forgot the Cromwells, who see the noble vessel — political economy — floundering upon a sea of confusion, and going down in a tempest of noisy bewilderment, and who yet are powerless to get at the helm, forbidden even to send



out a life-boat to the sinking ship. Surely it is a mistake to judge of what a man can do by that which he has done.

The world's Valhalla is a close borough, and perhaps the greatest men may be those who perish silently far away from the sacred portal. Perhaps the purest and brightest spirits are those who shrink from the turmoil of the race-course — the tumult and confusion of the struggle. The game of life is something like the game of *écarté*, and it may be that the best cards are sometimes left in the pack.

My lady threw off her bonnet, and seated herself upon a velvet-covered footstool at Sir Michael's feet. There was nothing studied or affected in this girlish action. It was so natural to Lucy Audley to be childish, that no one would have wished to see her otherwise. It would have seemed as foolish to expect dignified reserve or womanly gravity from this amber-haired syren, as to wish for rich basses in the clear treble of a skylark's song.

She sat with her pale face turned away from the firelight, and with her hands locked together upon the arm of her husband's easy-chair. They were very restless, these slender white hands. My lady twisted the jewelled fingers in and out of each other, as she talked to her husband.

"I wanted to come to you, you know, dear," she said — "I wanted to come to you directly I got home, but Mr. Audley insisted upon my stopping to talk to him."



"But what about, my love?" asked the baronet.  
"What could Robert have to say to you?"

My lady did not answer this question. Her fair head drooped upon her husband's knee, her rippling yellow curls fell over her face.

Sir Michael lifted that beautiful head with his strong hands, and raised my lady's face. The firelight shining on that pale face lit up the large, soft blue eyes which were drowned in tears.

"Lucy, Lucy!" cried the baronet, "what is the meaning of this? My love, my love, what has happened to distress you in this manner?"

Lady Audley tried to speak, but the words died away inarticulately upon her trembling lips. A choking sensation in her throat seemed to strangle those false and plausible words, her only armour against her enemies. She could not speak. The agony she had endured silently in the dismal lime-walk had grown too strong for her, and she broke into a tempest of hysterical sobbing. It was no simulated grief that shook her slender frame, and tore at her like some ravenous beast that would have rent her piece-meal with its horrible strength. It was a storm of real anguish and terror, of remorse and misery. It was the one wild outcry, in which the woman's feebler nature got the better of the syren's art.

It was not thus that she had meant to fight her terrible duel with Robert Audley. These were not the weapons which she had intended to use; but perhaps no artifice which she could have devised would have



served her so well as this one outburst of natural grief. It shook her husband to the very soul. It bewildered and terrified him. It reduced the strong intellect of the man to helpless confusion and perplexity. It struck at the one weak point in a good man's nature. It appealed straight to Sir Michael Audley's affection for his wife.

Ah, Heaven help a strong man's tender weakness for the woman he loves. Heaven pity him when the guilty creature has deceived him and comes with her tears and lamentations to throw herself at his feet in self-abandonment and remorse, torturing him with the sight of her agony, rending *his* heart with her sobs, lacerating *his* breast with her groans. Multiplying her own sufferings into a great anguish for him to bear, multiplying them by twenty-fold, multiplying them in the ratio of a brave man's capacity for endurance. Heaven forgive him if, maddened by that cruel agony, the balance wavers for a moment, and he is ready to forgive *anything*, ready to take this wretched one to the shelter of his breast, and to pardon that which the stern voice of manly honour urges must not be pardoned. Pity him, pity him. The wife's worst remorse when she stands without the threshold of the home she may never enter more is not equal to the agony of the husband who closes the portal on that familiar and entreating face. The anguish of the mother who may never look again upon her children is less than the torment of the father who has to say to those children, "My little ones, you are henceforth motherless."



Sir Michael Audley rose from his chair, trembling with indignation, and ready to do immediate battle with the person who had caused his wife's grief.

"Lucy," he said, "Lucy, I insist upon your telling me what and who has distressed you. I insist upon it. Whoever has annoyed you shall answer to me for your grief. Come, my love, tell me directly what it is?"

He reseated himself and bent over the drooping figure at his feet, calming his own agitation in his desire to soothe his wife's distress.

"Tell me what it is, my dear?" he whispered, tenderly.

The sharp paroxysm had passed away, and my lady looked up: a glittering light shone through the tears in her eyes, and the lines about her pretty rosy mouth, those hard and cruel lines which Robert Audley had observed in the pre-Raphaelite portrait, were plainly visible in the firelight.

"I am very silly," she said; "but really he has made me quite hysterical."

"Who — who has made you hysterical?"

"Your nephew — Mr. Robert Audley."

"Robert!" cried the baronet. "Lucy, what do you mean?"

"I told you that Mr. Audley insisted upon my going into the lime-walk, dear," said my lady. "He wanted to talk to me, he said, and I went, and he said such horrible things that —"

"What horrible things, Lucy?"

Lady Audley shuddered and clung with convulsive



fingers to the strong hand that had rested caressingly upon her shoulder.

"What did he say, Lucy?"

"Oh, my dear love, how can I tell you?" cried my lady. "I know that I shall distress you — or you will laugh at me, and then —"

"Laugh at you? no, Lucy."

Lady Audley was silent for a moment. She sat looking straight before her into the fire, with her fingers still locked about her husband's hand.

"My dear," she said, slowly, hesitating now and then between her words, as if she almost shrank from uttering them, "have you ever — I am so afraid of vexing you — or — have you ever thought Mr. Audley a little — a little —"

"A little what, my darling?"

"A little out of his mind," faltered Lady Audley.

"Out of his mind!" cried Sir Michael. "My dear girl, what are you thinking of?"

"You said just now, dear, that you thought he was half mad."

"Did I, my love?" said the baronet, laughing. "I don't remember saying it, and it was a mere *façon de parler*, that meant nothing whatever. Robert may be a little eccentric — a little stupid, perhaps — he mayn't be overburdened with wits, but I don't think he has brains enough for madness. I believe it's generally your great intellects that get out of order."

"But madness is sometimes hereditary," said my lady. "Mr. Audley may have inherited —"



"He has inherited no madness from his father's family," interrupted Sir Michael. "The Audleys have never peopled private lunatic asylums or fee'd mad doctors."

"Nor from his mother's family?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"People generally keep these things a secret," said my lady, gravely. "There may have been madness in your sister-in-law's family."

"I don't think so, my dear," replied Sir Michael. "But, Lucy, tell me what, in Heaven's name, has put this idea into your head?"

"I have been trying to account for your nephew's conduct. I can account for it in no other manner. If you had heard the things he said to me to-night, Sir Michael, you too might have thought him mad."

"But what did he say, Lucy?"

"I can scarcely tell you. You can see how much he has stupefied and bewildered me. I believe he has lived too long alone in those solitary Temple chambers. Perhaps he reads too much, or smokes too much. You know that some physicians declare madness to be a mere illness of the brain — an illness to which any one is subject, and which may be produced by given causes, and cured by given means."

Lady Audley's eyes were still fixed upon the burning coals in the wide grate. She spoke as if she had been discussing a subject that she had often heard discussed before. She spoke as if her mind had almost wandered away from the thought of her husband's



nephew to the wider question of madness in the abstract.

"Why should he not be mad?" resumed my lady. "People are insane for years and years before their insanity is found out. *They* know that they are mad, but they know how to keep their secret; and, perhaps they may sometimes keep it till they die. Sometimes a paroxysm seizes them, and in an evil hour they betray themselves. They commit a crime, perhaps. The horrible temptation of opportunity assails them, the knife is in their hand, and the unconscious victim by their side. They may conquer the restless demon and go away, and die innocent of any violent deed; but they may yield to the horrible temptation — the frightful, passionate, hungry craving for violence and horror. They sometimes yield, and are lost."

Lady Audley's voice rose as she argued this dreadful question. The hysterical excitement from which she had only just recovered had left its effects upon her, but she controlled herself, and her tone grew calmer as she resumed: —

"Robert Audley is mad," she said, decisively. "What is one of the strongest diagnostics of madness — what is the first appalling sign of mental aberration? The mind becomes stationary; the brain stagnates; the even current of the mind is interrupted; the thinking power of the brain resolves itself into a monotone. As the waters of a tideless pool putrefy by reason of their stagnation, the mind becomes turbid and corrupt through lack of action; and perpetual



reflection upon one subject resolves itself into monomania. Robert Audley is a monomaniac. The disappearance of his friend, George Talboys, grieved and bewildered him. He dwelt upon this one idea until he lost the power of thinking of anything else. The one idea looked at perpetually became distorted to his mental vision. Repeat the commonest word in the English language twenty times, and before the twentieth repetition you will have begun to wonder whether the word which you repeat is really the word you mean to utter. Robert Audley has thought of his friend's disappearance until the one idea has done its fatal and unhealthy work. He looks at a common event with a vision that is diseased, and he distorts it into a gloomy horror engendered of his own monomania. If you do not want to make me as mad as he is, you must never let me see him again. He declared to-night that George Talboys was murdered in this place, and that he will root up every tree in the gardens, and pull down every brick in the house, in his search for —"

My lady paused. The words died away upon her lips. She had exhausted herself by the strange energy with which she had spoken. She had been transformed from a frivolous childish beauty into a woman, strong to argue her own cause and plead her own defence.

"Pull down this house!" cried the baronet. "George Talboys murdered at Audley Court! Did Robert say this, Lucy?"



"He said something of that kind — something that frightened me very much."

"Then he must be mad," said Sir Michael, gravely. "I'm bewildered by what you tell me. Did he really say this, Lucy, or did you misunderstand him?"

"I — I — don't think I did," faltered my lady. "You saw how frightened I was when I first came in. I should not have been so much agitated if he hadn't said something horrible."

Lady Audley had availed herself of the very strongest argument by which she could help her cause.

"To be sure, my darling, to be sure," answered the baronet. "What could have put such a horrible fancy into the unhappy boy's head? This Mr. Talboys — a perfect stranger to all of us — murdered, at Audley Court! I'll go to Mount Stanning to-night, and see Robert. I have known him ever since he was a baby, and I cannot be deceived in him. If there is really anything wrong, he will not be able to conceal it from me."

My lady shrugged her shoulders.

"That is rather an open question," she said. "It is generally a stranger who is the first to observe any psychological peculiarity."

The big words sounded strange from my lady's rosy lips; but her newly-adopted wisdom had a certain quaint prettiness about it, which bewildered her husband.



"But you must not go to Mount Stanning, my dear darling," she said, tenderly. "Remember that you are under strict orders to stay in-doors until the weather is milder, and the sun shines upon this cruel ice-bound country."

Sir Michael Audley sank back in his capacious chair with a sigh of resignation.

"That's true, Lucy," he said; "we must obey Mr. Dawson. I suppose Robert will come to see me to-morrow."

"Yes, dear. I think he said he would."

"Then we must wait till to-morrow, my darling. I can't believe that there really is anything wrong with the poor boy — I can't believe it, Lucy."

"Then how do you account for his extraordinary delusion about this Mr. Talboys?" asked my lady.

Sir Michael shook his head.

"I don't know, Lucy — I don't know," he answered. "It is always so difficult to believe that any one of the calamities that continually befall our fellow-men will ever happen to us. I can't believe that my nephew's mind is impaired — I can't believe it. I — I'll get him to stop here, Lucy, and I'll watch him closely. I tell you, my love, if there is anything wrong I am sure to find it out. I can't be mistaken in a young man who has always been the same to me as my own son. But, my darling, why were you so frightened by Robert's wild talk? It could not affect you."

My lady sighed piteously.



"You must think me very strong-minded, Sir Michael," she said, with rather an injured air, "if you imagine I can hear of these sort of things indifferently. I know I shall never be able to see Mr. Audley again."

"And you shall not, my dear — you shall not."

"You said just now you would have him here," murmured Lady Audley.

"But I will not, my darling girl, if his presence annoys you. Good heavens, Lucy, can you imagine for a moment that I have any higher wish than to promote your happiness? I will consult some London physician about Robert, and let him discover if there is really anything the matter with my poor brother's only son. *You* shall not be annoyed, Lucy."

"You must think me very unkind, dear," said my lady, "and I know I *ought* not to be annoyed by the poor fellow; but he really seems to have taken some absurd notion into his head about me."

"About *you*, Lucy!" cried Sir Michael.

"Yes, dear. He seems to connect me in some vague manner — which I cannot quite understand — with the disappearance of this Mr. Talboys."

"Impossible, Lucy. You must have misunderstood him."

"I don't think so."

"Then he must be mad," said the baronet — "he must be mad. I will wait till he goes back to town, and then send some one to his chambers to talk to



him. Good heavens, what a mysterious business this is!"

"I fear I have distressed you, darling," murmured Lady Audley.

"Yes, my dear, I am very much distressed by what you have told me; but you were quite right to talk to me frankly about this dreadful business. I must think it over, dearest, and try and decide what is best to be done."

My lady rose from the low ottoman on which she had been seated. The fire had burned down, and there was only a faint glow of red light in the room. Lucy Audley bent over her husband's chair, and put her lips to his broad forehead.

"How good you have always been to me, dear," she whispered softly. "You would never let any one influence you against me, would you, my darling?"

"Influence me against you?" repeated the baronet. "No, my love."

"Because you know, dear," pursued my lady, "there are wicked people as well as mad people in the world, and there may be some persons to whose interest it would be to injure me."

"They had better not try it then, my dear," answered Sir Michael; "they would find themselves in rather a dangerous position if they did."

Lady Audley laughed aloud, with a gay, triumphant, silvery peal of laughter that vibrated through the quiet room.

"My own dear darling," she said, "I know you



love me. And now I must run away, dear, for it's past seven o'clock. I was engaged to dine at Mrs. Montford's, but I must send a groom with a message of apology, for Mr. Audley has made me quite unfit for company. I shall stay at home, and nurse you, dear. You'll go to bed very early, won't you, and take great care of yourself?"

"Yes, dear."

My lady tripped out of the room to give her orders about the message which was to be carried to the house at which she was to have dined. She paused for a moment as she closed the library door — she paused, and laid her hand upon her breast to check the rapid throbbing of her heart.

"I have been afraid of you, Mr. Robert Audley," she thought, "but perhaps the time may come in which you will have cause to be afraid of me."

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## CHAPTER VI.

## Phœbe's Petition.

THE division between Lady Audley and her step-daughter had not become any narrower in the two months which had elapsed since the pleasant Christmas holiday time had been kept at Audley Court. There was no open warfare between the two women; there was only an armed neutrality, broken every now and then by brief feminine skirmishes and transient wordy tempests. I am sorry to say that Alicia would very much have preferred a hearty pitched battle to this silent and undemonstrative disunion; but it was not very easy to quarrel with my lady. She had soft answers for the turning away of wrath. She could smile bewitchingly at her step-daughter's open petulance, and laugh merrily at the young lady's ill-temper. Perhaps had she been less amiable, had she been indeed more like Alicia in disposition, the two ladies might have expended their enmity in one tremendous quarrel, and might ever afterwards have been affectionate and friendly. But Lucy Audley would not make war. She carried forward the sum of her dislike, and put it out at a steady rate of interest, until the breach between her step-daughter and herself widening a little every day, became a great gulf utterly impassable by olive-branch-bearing doves, from either



side of the abyss. There can be no reconciliation where there is no open warfare. There must be a battle, a brave boisterous battle, with pennants waving and cannon roaring, before there can be peaceful treaties and enthusiastic shaking of hands. Perhaps the union between France and England owes its greatest force to the recollection of bygone conquest and defeat. We have hated each other and licked each other and *had it out*, as the common phrase goes, and we can afford now to fall into each other's arms and vow eternal friendship and everlasting brotherhood. Let us hope that when Northern Yankeydom has decimated and been decimated, blustering Jonathan may fling himself upon his southern brother's breast, forgiving and forgiven.

Alicia Audley and her father's pretty wife had plenty of room for the comfortable indulgence of their dislike in the spacious old mansion. My lady had her own apartments, as we know — luxurious chambers, in which all conceivable elegancies had been gathered for the comfort of their occupant. Alicia had her own rooms in another part of the large house. She had her favourite mare, her Newfoundland dog, and her drawing materials, and she made herself tolerably happy. She was not very happy, this frank, generous-hearted girl, for it was scarcely possible that she could be altogether at ease in the constrained atmosphere of the Court. Her father was changed — that dear father, over whom she had once reigned supreme with the boundless authority of a spoiled child, had accepted



another ruler and submitted to a new dynasty. Little by little my lady's pretty power made itself felt in that narrow household, and Alicia saw her father gradually lured across the gulf that divided Lady Audley from her step-daughter, until he stood at last quite upon the other side of the abyss, and looked coldly upon his only child across that widening chasm.

Alicia felt that he was lost to her. My lady's beaming smiles, my lady's winning words, my lady's radiant glances and bewitching graces had done their work of enchantment, and Sir Michael had grown to look upon his daughter as a somewhat wilful and capricious young person who had behaved with determined unkindness to the wife he loved.

Poor Alicia saw all this, and bore her burden as well as she could. It seemed very hard to be a handsome grey-eyed heiress, with dogs and horses and servants at her command, and yet to be so much alone in the world as to know of not one friendly ear into which she might pour her sorrows.

"If Bob was good for anything, I could have told him how unhappy I am," thought Miss Audley; "but I may just as well tell Cæsar my troubles, for any consolation I should get from my cousin Robert."

Sir Michael Audley obeyed his pretty nurse, and went to bed at a little after nine o'clock upon this bleak March evening. Perhaps the baronet's bedroom was about the pleasantest retreat that an invalid could have chosen in such cold and cheerless weather. The dark-green velvet curtains were drawn before the



windows and about the ponderous bed. The wood fire burned redly upon the broad hearth. The reading-lamp was lighted upon a delicious little table close to Sir Michael's pillow, and a heap of magazines and newspapers had been arranged by my lady's own fair hands for the pleasure of the invalid.

Lady Audley sat by the bedside for about ten minutes talking to her husband, talking very seriously, about this strange and awful question — Robert Audley's lunacy; but at the end of that time she rose and bade him good-night. She lowered the green silk shade before the reading-lamp, adjusting it carefully for the repose of the baronet's eyes.

"I shall leave you, dear," she said. "If you can sleep, so much the better. If you wish to read, the books and papers are close to you. I will leave the doors between the rooms open, and I shall hear your voice if you call me."

Lady Audley went through her dressing-room into the boudoir, where she had sat with her husband since dinner.

Every evidence of womanly refinement was visible in the elegant chamber. My lady's piano was open, covered with scattered sheets of music and exquisitely-bound collections of scenas and fantasias which no master need have disdained to study. My lady's easel stood near the window, bearing witness to my lady's artistic talent, in the shape of a water-coloured sketch of the Court and gardens. My lady's fairy-like embroideries of lace and muslin, rainbow-hued silks, and



delicately-tinted wools littered the luxurious apartment; while the looking-glasses, cunningly placed at angles and opposite corners by an artistic upholsterer, multiplied my lady's image, and in that image reflected the most beautiful object in the enchanted chamber.

Amid all this lamplight, gilding, colour, wealth, and beauty, Lucy Audley sat down on a low seat by the fire to think.

If Mr. Holman Hunt could have peeped into the pretty boudoir, I think the picture would have been photographed upon his brain to be reproduced by and bye upon a bishop's half-length for the glorification of the pre-Raphaelite brotherhood. My lady in that half-recumbent attitude, with her elbow resting on one knee, and her perfect chin supported by her hand, the rich folds of drapery falling away in long undulating lines from the exquisite outline of her figure, and the luminous rose-coloured fire-light enveloping her in a soft haze, only broken by the golden glitter of her yellow hair. Beautiful in herself, but made bewilderingly beautiful by the gorgeous surroundings which adorn the shrine of her loveliness. Drinking-cups of gold and ivory, chiselled by Benvenuto Cellini; cabinets of buhl and porcelain, bearing the cipher of Austrian Marie Antoinette, amid devices of rose-buds and true-lover's knots, birds and butterflies, cupidons and shepherdesses, goddesses, courtiers, cottagers and milkmaids; statuettes of Parian marble and biscuit china; gilded baskets of hot-house flowers; fantastical caskets of Indian filagree work; fragile tea-cups of



turquoise china, adorned by medallion miniatures of Louis the Great and Louis the Well-beloved, Louise de la Vallière, and Jeanne Marie du Barry; cabinet pictures and gilded mirrors, shimmering satin and diaphonous lace; all that gold can buy or art devise had been gathered together for the beautification of this quiet chamber in which my lady sat listening to the moaning of the shrill March wind and the flapping of the ivy leaves against the casements, and looking into the red chasms in the burning coals.

I should be preaching a very stale sermon, and harping upon a very familiar moral, if I were to seize this opportunity of declaiming against art and beauty, because my lady was more wretched in this elegant apartment than many a half-starved sempstress in her dreary garret. She was wretched by reason of a wound which lay too deep for the possibility of any solace from such plasters as wealth and luxury; but her wretchedness was of an abnormal nature, and I can see no occasion for seizing upon the fact of her misery as an argument in favour of poverty and discomfort as opposed to opulence. The Benvenuto Cellini carvings and the Sèvres porcelain could not give her happiness because she had passed out of their region. She was no longer innocent, and the pleasure we take in art and loveliness being an innocent pleasure had passed beyond her reach. Six or seven years before, she would have been happy in the possession of this little Aladdin's palace; but she had wandered out of the circle of careless pleasure-seeking creatures, she had



strayed far away into a desolate labyrinth of guilt and treachery, terror and crime, and all the treasures that had been collected for her could have given her no pleasure but one, the pleasure of flinging them into a heap beneath her feet, and trampling upon them and destroying them in her cruel despair.

There were some things that would have inspired her with an awful joy, a horrible rejoicing. If Robert Audley, her pitiless enemy, her unrelenting pursuer, had lain dead in the adjoining chamber, she would have exulted over his bier.

What pleasures could have remained for Lucretia Borgia and Catherine de' Medici, when the dreadful boundary line between innocence and guilt was passed, and the lost creatures stood upon the lonely outer side? Only horrible vengeful joys, and treacherous delights were left for these miserable women. With what disdainful bitterness they must have watched the frivolous vanities, the petty deceptions, the paltry sins of ordinary offenders. Perhaps they took a horrible pride in the enormity of their wickedness; in this "divinity of Hell," which made them greatest amongst sinful creatures.

My lady, brooding by the fire in her lonely chamber, with her large, clear blue eyes fixed upon the yawning gulfs of lurid crimson in the burning coals, may have thought of many things very far away from the terribly silent struggle in which she was engaged. She may have thought of long-ago years of childish innocence, childish follies and selfishnesses, or frivolous feminine



sins that had weighed very lightly upon her conscience. Perhaps in that retrospective reverie she recalled the early time in which she had first looked in the glass and discovered that she was beautiful: that fatal early time in which she had first begun to look upon her loveliness as a right divine, a boundless possession which was to be a set-off against all girlish short-comings, a counter-balance of every youthful sin. Did she remember the day in which that fairy dower of beauty had first taught her to be selfish and cruel, indifferent to the joys and sorrows of others, cold-hearted and capricious, greedy of admiration, exacting and tyrannical, with that petty woman's tyranny which is the worst of despotisms? Did she trace every sin of her life back to its true source? and did she discover that poisoned fountain in her own exaggerated estimate of the value of a pretty face? Surely, if her thoughts wandered so far along the backward current of her life, she must have repented in bitterness and despair of that first day in which the master-passions of her life had become her rulers, and the three demons of Vanity, Selfishness and Ambition had joined hands and said, "This woman is our slave; let us see what she will become under our guidance."

How small these first youthful errors seemed as my lady looked back upon them in that long reverie by the lonely hearth! What small vanities, what petty cruelties! A triumph over a schoolfellow, a flirtation with the lover of a friend, an assertion of the right divine invested in blue eyes and shimmering golden-



tinted hair. But how terribly that narrow path-way had widened out into the broad high-road of sin, and how swift the footsteps had become upon the now familiar way!

My lady twined her fingers in her loose amber curls, and made as if she would have torn them from her head. But even in that moment of mute despair the unyielding dominion of beauty asserted itself, and she released the poor tangled glitter of ringlets, leaving them to make a halo round her head in the dim fire-light.

"I was not wicked when I was young," she thought, as she stared gloomily at the fire, "I was only thoughtless. I never did any harm — at least, never wilfully. Have I ever been really *wicked*, I wonder?" she mused. "My worst wickedness have been the result of wild impulses, and not of deeply laid plots. I am not like the women I have read of, who have lain night after night in the horrible dark and stillness, planning out treacherous deeds, and arranging every circumstance of an appointed crime. I wonder whether they suffered — those women — whether they ever suffered as —"

Her thoughts wandered away into a weary maze of confusion. Suddenly she drew herself up with a proud defiant gesture, and her eyes glittered with a light that was not entirely reflected from the fire.

"You are mad, Mr. Robert Audley," she said, "you are mad, and your fancies are a madman's fancies. I know what madness is. I know its signs and tokens, and I say that you are mad."



She put her hand to her head, as if thinking of something which confused and bewildered her, and which she found it difficult to contemplate with calmness.

"Dare I defy him?" she muttered, "Dare I? dare I? Will he stop now that he has once gone so far? Will he stop for fear of me? Will he stop for fear of me when the thought of what his uncle must suffer has not stopped him? Will anything stop him — but death?"

She pronounced the last two words in an awful whisper, and with her head bent forward, her eyes dilated, and her lips still parted as they had been parted in her utterance of that final word "death," she sat blankly staring at the fire.

"I can't plot horrible things," she muttered presently; "my brain isn't strong enough, or I'm not wicked enough, or brave enough. If I met Robert Audley in those lonely gardens, as I —"

The current of her thoughts was interrupted by a cautious knocking at her door. She rose suddenly, startled by any sound in the stillness of her room. She rose, and threw herself into a low chair near the fire. She flung her beautiful head back upon the soft cushions, and took a book from the table near her.

Insignificant as this action was it spoke very plainly. It spoke very plainly of ever-recurring fears — of fatal necessities for concealment — of a mind that in its silent agonies was ever alive to the importance of outward effect. It told more plainly than



anything else could have told, how complete an actress my lady had been made by the awful necessity of her life.

The modest rap at the boudoir-door was repeated.

"Come in," cried Lady Audley, in her liveliest tone.

The door was opened with that respectful noiselessness peculiar to a well-bred servant, and a young woman plainly dressed, and carrying some of the cold March winds in the folds of her garments, crossed the threshold of the apartment and lingered near the door, waiting permission to approach the inner regions of my lady's retreat.

It was Phœbe Marks, the pale-faced wife of the Mount Stanning innkeeper.

"I beg pardon, my lady, for intruding without leave," she said; "but I thought I might venture to come straight up without waiting for permission."

"Yes, yes, Phœbe, to be sure. Take off your bonnet, you wretched cold-looking creature, and come and sit down here."

Lady Audley pointed to the low ottoman upon which she had herself been seated a few minutes before. The lady's-maid had often sat upon it listening to her mistress's prattle in the old days, when she had been my lady's chief companion and *confidante*.

"Sit down here, Phœbe," Lady Audley repeated; "sit down here and talk to me. I'm very glad you came here to-night. I was horribly lonely in this dreary place."



My lady shivered, and looked round the luxurious chamber very much as if the Sèvres and bronze, the buhl and ormolu, had been the mouldering adornments of some ruined castle. The dreary wretchedness of her thoughts had communicated itself to every object about her, and all outer things took their colour from that weary inner life which held its slow course of secret anguish in her breast. She had spoken the entire truth in saying that she was glad of her lady's-maid's visit. Her frivolous nature clung to this weak shelter in the hour of her fear and suffering. There were sympathies between her and this girl, who was like herself inwardly as well as outwardly — like herself, selfish, and cold, and cruel, eager for her own advancement, and greedy of opulence and elegance, angry with the lot that had been cast her, and weary of dull dependence. My lady hated Alicia for her frank, passionate, generous, daring nature; she hated her step-daughter, and clung to this pale-faced, pale-haired girl, whom she thought neither better nor worse than herself.

Phœbe Marks obeyed her late mistress's commands, and took off her bonnet before seating herself on the ottoman at Lady Audley's feet. Her smooth bands of light hair were unruffled by the March winds; her trimly-made drab dress and linen collar were as neatly arranged as they could have been had she only that moment completed her toilet.

"Sir Michael is better, I hope, my lady?" she said.

"Yes, Phœbe, much better. He is asleep. You



may close that door," added Lady Audley with a motion of her head towards the door of communication between the rooms, which had been left open.

Mrs. Marks obeyed submissively, and then returned to her seat.

"I am very, very unhappy, Phœbe," my lady said, fretfully; "wretchedly miserable."

"About the secret?" asked Mrs. Marks, in a half whisper.

My lady did not notice that question. She resumed in the same complaining tone. She was glad to be able to complain even to this lady's-maid. She had brooded over her fears, and had suffered so long in secret, that it was an inexpressible relief to her to bemoan her fate aloud.

"I am cruelly persecuted and harassed, Phœbe Marks," she said. "I am pursued and tormented by a man whom I never injured, whom I have never wished to injure. I am never suffered to rest by this relentless tormentor, and I —"

She paused, staring at the fire again, as she had done in her loneliness. Lost again in the dark intricacies of thoughts which wandered hither and thither in a dreadful chaos of terrified bewilderment, she could not come to any fixed conclusion.

Phœbe Marks watched my lady's face, looking upward at her late mistress with pale, anxious eyes, that only relaxed their watchfulness when Lady Audley's glance met that of her companion.

"I think I know whom you mean, my lady," said



the innkeeper's wife after a pause; "I think I know who it is who is so cruel to you."

"Oh, of course," answered my lady, bitterly; "my secrets are everybody's secrets. You know all about it, no doubt."

"The person is a gentleman, is he not, my lady?"

"Yes."

"A gentleman who came to the Castle Inn two months ago, when I warned you —"

"Yes, yes," answered my lady impatiently.

"I thought so. The same gentleman is at our place to-night, my lady."

Lady Audley started up from her chair — started up as if she would have done something desperate in her despairing fury; but she sank back again with a weary, querulous sigh. What warfare could such a feeble creature wage against her fate? What could she do but wind like a hunted hare till she found her way back to the starting-point of the cruel chace, to be there trampled down by her pursuers?

"At the Castle Inn?" she cried. "I might have known as much. He has gone there to wring my secrets from your husband. Fool!" she exclaimed, suddenly turning upon Phœbe Marks in a transport of anger, "do you want to destroy me that you have left those two men together?"

Mrs. Marks clasped her hands piteously.

"I didn't come away of my own free will, my lady," she said; "no one could have been more un-



willing to leave the house than I was this night. I was sent here."

"Who sent you here?"

"Luke, my lady. You can't tell how hard he can be upon me if I go against him."

"Why did he send you?"

The innkeeper's wife dropped her eyelids under Lady Audley's angry glances, and hesitated confusedly before she answered this question.

"Indeed, my lady," she stammered, "I didn't want to come. I told Luke that it was too bad for us to worry you, first asking this favour, and then asking that, and never leaving you alone for a month together; but — but — he drove me down with his loud blustering talk, and he made me come."

"Yes, yes," cried Lady Audley, impatiently. "I know that. I want to know why you have come."

"Why, you know, my lady," answered Phœbe, half reluctantly, "Luke is very extravagant; and all I can say to him, I can't get him to be careful or steady. He's not sober; and when he's drinking with a lot of rough countrymen, and drinking, perhaps, even more than they do, it isn't likely that his head can be very clear for accounts. If it hadn't been for me we should have been ruined before this; and hard as I've tried, I haven't been able to keep the ruin off. You remember giving me the money for the brewer's bill, my lady?"

"Yes, I remember very well," answered Lady Aud-



ley, with a bitter laugh, "for I wanted that money to pay my own bills."

"I know you did, my lady, and it was very, very hard for me to have to come and ask you for it, after all that we'd received from you before. But that isn't the worst; when Luke sent me down here to beg the favour of that help, he never told me that the Christmas rent was still owing: but it was, my lady, and it's owing now, and — and there's a bailiff in the house to-night, and we're to be sold up to-morrow unless —"

"Unless I pay your rent, I suppose," cried Lucy Audley. "I might have guessed what was coming."

"Indeed, indeed, my lady, I wouldn't have asked it," sobbed Phœbe Marks, "but he made me come."

"Yes," answered my lady bitterly, "he made you come; and he will make you come whenever he pleases, and whenever he wants money for the gratification of his low vices; and you and he are my pensioners as long as I live, or as long as I have any money to give; for I suppose when my purse is empty and my credit ruined, you and your husband will turn upon me and sell me to the highest bidder. Do you know, Phœbe Marks, that my jewel-case has been half emptied to meet your claims? Do you know that my pin money, which I thought such a princely allowance when my marriage settlement was made, and when I was a poor governess at Mr. Dawson's, Heaven help me — my pin money has been overdrawn half a year to satisfy your demands? What can I do to appease you? Shall I sell my Marie Antoinette cabinet, or



my Pompadour china, Leroy's and Benson's ormolu clocks, or my Gobelin tapestried chairs and ottomans? How shall I satisfy you next?"

"Oh, my lady, my lady," cried Phœbe, piteously, "don't be so cruel to me; you know, you know that it isn't I who want to impose upon you."

"I know nothing," exclaimed Lady Audley, "except that I am the most miserable of women. Let me think," she cried, silencing Phœbe's consolatory murmurs with an imperious gesture. "Hold your tongue, girl, and let me think of this business, if I can."

She put her hands to her forehead, clasping her slender fingers across her brow, as if she would have controlled the action of her brain by their convulsive pressure.

"Robert Audley is with your husband," she said, slowly, speaking to herself rather than to her companion. "Those two men are together, and there are bailiffs in the house, and your brutal husband is no doubt brutally drunk by this time, and brutally obstinate and ferocious in his drunkenness. If I refuse to pay this money his ferocity will be multiplied by a hundredfold. There's little use in discussing that matter. The money must be paid."

"But if you do pay it, my lady," said Phœbe, very earnestly, "I hope you will impress upon Luke that it is the last money you will ever give him while he stops in that house."

"Why?" asked Lady Audley, letting her hands



fall on her lap, and looking inquiringly at Mrs. Marks.

"Because I want Luke to leave the Castle."

"But why do you want him to leave?"

"Oh, for ever so many reasons, my lady," answered Phoebe. "He's not fit to be the landlord of a public-house. I didn't know that when I married him, or I would have gone against the business, and tried to persuade him to take to the farming line. Not that I suppose he'd have given up his own fancy, though, either; for he's obstinate enough, as you know, my lady. He's not fit for his present business, though. He's scarcely ever sober after dark, and when he's drunk he gets almost wild, and doesn't seem to know what he does. We've had two or three narrow escapes with him already."

"Narrow escapes!" repeated Lady Audley. "What do you mean!"

"Why, we've run the risk of being burnt in our beds through his carelessness."

"Burnt in your beds through his carelessness! Why, how was that?" asked my lady, rather listlessly. She was too selfish, and too deeply absorbed in her own troubles, to take much interest in any danger which had befallen her sometime lady's-maid.

"You know what a queer old place the Castle is, my lady; all tumble-down wood-work, and rotten rafters, and such like. The Chelmsford Insurance Company won't insure it, for they say if the place did happen to catch fire upon a windy night it would



blaze away like so much tinder, and nothing in the world could save it. Well, Luke knows this, and the landlord has warned him of it times and often, for he lives close against us, and he keeps a pretty sharp eye upon all my husband's goings on, but when Luke's tipsy he doesn't know what he's about, and only a week ago he left a candle burning in one of the outhouses, and the flame caught one of the rafters of the sloping roof, and if it hadn't been for me finding it out when I went round the house the last thing, we should have all been burnt to death perhaps. And that's the third time the same kind of thing has happened in the six months we've had the place, and you can't wonder that I'm frightened; can you, my lady?"

My lady had not wondered, she had not thought about the business at all. She had scarcely listened to these common-place details; why should she care for this low-born waiting woman's perils and troubles? Had she not her own terrors, her own soul-absorbing perplexities to usurp every thought of which her brain was capable.

She did not make any remark upon that which poor Phœbe had just told her; she scarcely comprehended what had been said, until some moments after the girl had finished speaking, when the words assumed their full meaning, as some words do two or three minutes after they have been heard without being heeded.

"Burnt in your beds," said my lady, at last. "It would have been a good thing for me if that precious



creature, your husband, had been burnt in his bed before to-night."

A vivid picture flashed upon her as she spoke. The picture of that frail wooden tenement, the Castle Inn, reduced to a roofless chaos of lath and plaster, vomiting flames from its black mouth and spitting sparks of fire upward towards the cold night sky.

She gave a weary sigh as she dismissed this image from her restless brain. She would be no better off even if this enemy should be for ever silenced. She had another and far more dangerous foe — a foe who was not to be bribed or bought off, though she had been as rich as an empress.

"I'll give you the money to send this bailiff away," my lady said, after a pause. "I must give you the last sovereign in my purse, but what of that? You know as well as I do that I dare not refuse you."

Lady Audley rose and took the lighted lamp from her writing-table. "The money is in my dressing-room," she said; "I will go and fetch it."

"Oh, my lady," exclaimed Phœbe, suddenly. "I forget something; I was in such a way about this business that I quite forgot it."

"Quite forgot what?"

"A letter that was given me to bring to you, my lady, just before I left home."

"What letter?"

"A letter from Mr. Audley. He heard my husband mention that I was coming down here, and he asked me to carry this letter."



Lady Audley set the lamp down upon the table nearest to her, and held out her hand to receive the letter. Phœbe Marks could scarcely fail to observe that the little jewelled hand shook like a leaf.

"Give it me — give it me," cried my lady; "let me see what more he has to say."

She almost snatched the letter from Phœbe's hand in her wild impatience. She tore open the envelope and flung it from her; she could scarcely unfold the sheet of note-paper in her eager excitement.

The letter was very brief. It contained only these words: —

"Should Mrs. George Talboys really have survived the date of her supposed death, as recorded in the public prints, and upon the tomb-stone in Ventnor churchyard, and should she exist in the person of the lady suspected and accused by the writer of this, there can be no great difficulty in finding some one able and willing to identify her. Mrs. Barkamb, the owner of North Cottages, Wildernsea, would no doubt consent to throw some light upon this matter, either to dispel a delusion or to confirm a suspicion."

"ROBERT AUDLEY.

"March 3rd, 1859.

"The Castle Inn, Mount Stanning."

My lady crushed the letter fiercely in her hand, and flung it from her into the flames.



"If he stood before me now, and I could kill him," she muttered in a strange inward whisper, "I would do it — I would do it!" She snatched up the lamp and rushed into the adjoining room. She shut the door behind her. She could not endure any witness of her horrible despair — she could endure nothing; neither herself nor her surroundings.

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## CHAPTER VII.

## The Red Light in the Sky.

THE door between my lady's dressing-room and the bedchamber in which Sir Michael lay, had been left open. The baronet slept peacefully, his noble face plainly visible in the subdued lamplight. His breathing was low and regular, his lips curved in a half smile — a smile of tender happiness which he often wore when he looked at his beautiful wife, the smile of an all-indulgent father, who looked admiringly at his favourite child.

Some touch of womanly feeling, some sentiment of compassion softened Lady Audley's glance as it fell upon that noble reposing figure. For a moment the horrible egotism of her own misery yielded to her pitying tenderness for another. It was perhaps only a semi-selfish tenderness after all, in which pity for herself was as powerful as pity for her husband; but for once in a way, her thoughts ran out of the narrow groove of her own terrors and her own troubles to dwell with prophetic grief upon the coming sorrows of another.

"If they make him believe, how wretched he will be," she thought.

But intermingled with that thought there was another — there was the thought of her lovely face, her



bewitching manner, her arch smile, her low musical laugh, which was like a peal of silvery bells ringing across a broad expanse of flat pasture, and a rippling river in the misty summer evening. She thought of all these things with a transient thrill of triumph, which was stronger even than her terror.

If Sir Michael Audley lived to be a hundred years old, whatever he might learn to believe of her, however he might grow to despise her, would he ever be able to disassociate her from these attributes? No; a thousand times, no. To the last hour of his life his memory would present her to him invested with the loveliness that had first won his enthusiastic admiration, his devoted affection. Her worst enemies could not rob her of that fairy dower which had been so fatal in its influence upon her frivolous mind.

She paced up and down the dressing-room in the silvery lamplight, pondering upon the strange letter which she had received from Robert Audley. She walked backwards and forwards in that monotonous wandering for some time before she was able to steady her thoughts — before she was able to bring the scattered forces of her narrow intellect to bear upon the one all-important subject of the threat contained in the barrister's letter.

"He will do it," she said, between her set teeth; "he will do it, unless I get him into a lunatic asylum first; or unless —"

She did not finish the thought in words. She did not even think out the sentence; but some new and un-



natural pulse in her heart seemed to beat out each separate syllable against her breast.

The thought was this: "He will do it, unless some strange calamity befalls him and silences him for ever." The red blood flashed up into my lady's face with as sudden and transient a blaze as the flickering flame of a fire, and died as suddenly away, leaving her more pale than winter snow. Her hands, which had before been locked convulsively together, fell apart and dropped heavily at her sides. She stopped in her rapid pacing to and fro — stopped as Lot's wife may have stopped, after that fatal backward glance at the perishing city, with every pulse slackening, with every drop of blood congealing in her veins, in the terrible process that was to transform her from a woman into a statue.

Lady Audley stood still for about five minutes in that strangely statuesque attitude, her head erect, her eyes staring straight before her — staring far beyond the narrow boundary of her chamber wall, into dark distances of peril and horror.

But, by-and-by, she started from that rigid attitude almost as abruptly as she had fallen into it. She roused herself from that semi-lethargy, and walked rapidly to her dressing-table, and seating herself before it, pushed away the litter of golden-stoppered bottles, and delicate china-essence-boxes, and looked at her reflection in the large oval glass. She was very pale; but there was no other trace of agitation visible in her girlish face. The lines of her exquisitely-moulded lips were so beautiful,



that it was only a very close observer who could have perceived a certain rigidity that was unusual to them. She saw this herself, and tried to smile away that statue-like immobility; but to-night the rosy lips refused to obey her, they were firmly locked, and were no longer the slaves of her will and pleasure. All the latent forces of her character concentrated themselves in this one feature. She might command her eyes; but she could not control the muscles of her mouth. She rose from before her dressing-table and took a dark velvet cloak and bonnet from the recesses of her wardrobe, and dressed herself for walking. The little ormolu clock on the chimney-piece struck the quarter after eleven while Lady Audley was employed in this manner; five minutes afterwards, she re-entered the room in which she had left Phœbe Marks.

The innkeeper's wife was sitting before the low hearth very much in the same attitude as that in which her late mistress had brooded over that lonely hearth earlier in the evening. Phœbe had replenished the fire, and had reassumed her bonnet and shawl. She was anxious to get home to that brutal husband, who was only too apt to fall into some mischief in her absence. She looked up as Lady Audley entered the room, and uttered an exclamation of surprise at seeing her mistress in a walking costume.

"My lady," she cried, "you are not going out to-night?"

"Yes, I am, Phœbe," Lady Audley answered, very



quietly; "I am going to Mount Stanning with you, to see this bailiff, and to pay and dismiss him myself."

"But, my lady, you forget what the time is; you can't go out at such an hour."

Lady Audley did not answer. She stood, with her fingers resting lightly upon the handle of the bell, meditating quietly.

"The stables are always locked, and the men in bed by ten o'clock," she murmured, "when we are at home. It will make a terrible hubbub to get a carriage ready; but yet I dare say one of the servants could manage the matter quietly for me."

"But why should you go to-night, my lady?" cried Phoebe Marks. "To-morrow will do quite as well. A week hence will do as well. Our landlord would take the man away if he had your promise to settle the debt."

Lady Audley took no notice of this interruption. She went hastily into the dressing-room, and flung off her bonnet and cloak, and then returned to the boudoir, in her simple dinner costume, with her curls brushed carelessly away from her face. "Now, Phoebe Marks, listen to me," she said, grasping her *confidante's* wrist, and speaking in a low, earnest voice, but with a certain imperious air that challenged contradiction, and commanded obedience.

"Listen to me, Phoebe," she said, "I am going to the Castle Inn, to-night; whether it is early or late is of very little consequence to me; I have set my mind upon going, and I shall go. You have asked me why,



and I have told you. I am going in order that I may pay this debt myself, and that I may see for myself that the money I give is applied to the purpose for which I give it. There is nothing out of the common course of life in my doing this. I am going to do what other women in my position very often do. I am going to assist a favourite servant."

"But it's getting on for twelve o'clock, my lady," pleaded Phoebe.

Lady Audley frowned impatiently at this interruption.

"If my going to your house to pay this man should be known," she continued, still retaining her hold of Phoebe's wrist, "I am ready to answer for my conduct: but I would rather that the business should be kept quiet. I think that I can leave this house and return to it without being seen by any living creature, if you will do as I tell you."

"I will do anything that you wish, my lady," answered Phoebe, submissively.

"Then you will wish me good-night presently, when my maid comes into the room, and you will suffer her to show you out of the house. You will cross the courtyard and wait for me in the avenue upon the other side of the archway. It may be half an hour before I am able to join you, for I must not leave my room till the servants have all gone to bed; but you may wait for me patiently, for come what may, I will join you."

Lady Audley's face was no longer pale. An un-



natural crimson spot burned in the centre of each rounded cheek, and an unnatural lustre gleamed in her great blue eyes. She spoke with an unnatural clearness, and an unnatural rapidity. She had altogether the appearance and manner of a person who has yielded to the dominant influence of some overpowering excitement. Phœbe Marks stared at her late mistress in mute bewilderment. She began to fear that my lady was going mad.

The bell which Lady Audley rang was answered by the smart lady's maid, who wore rose-coloured ribbons and black silk gowns, and other adornments which were unknown to the humble people who sat below the salt in the good old days when servants wore linsey-woolsey.

"I did not know that it was so late, Martin," said my lady, in that gentle tone which always won for her the willing service of her inferiors. "I have been talking with Mrs. Marks, and have let the time slip by me. I shan't want anything to-night, so you may go to bed when you please."

"Thank you, my lady," answered the girl, who looked very sleepy, and had some difficulty in repressing a yawn even in her mistress's presence, for the Audley household usually kept very early hours. "I'd better show Mrs. Marks out, my lady, hadn't I," asked the maid, "before I go to bed?"

"Oh, yes, to be sure, you can let Phœbe out. All the other servants have gone to bed, then, I suppose?"

"Yes, my lady."



Lady Audley laughed as she glanced at the time-piece.

"We have been terribly dissipated up here, Phœbe," she said. "Good night. You may tell your husband that his rent shall be paid."

"Thank you very much, my lady, and good-night," murmured Phœbe, as she backed out of the room followed by the lady's maid.

Lady Audley listened at the door, waiting till the muffled sound of their footsteps died away in the octagon chamber, and on the carpeted staircase.

"Martin sleeps at the top of the house," she said, "ever so far away from this room. In ten minutes I may safely make my escape."

She went back into her dressing-room, and put on her cloak and bonnet for the second time. The unnatural colour still burnt like a flame in her cheeks, the unnatural light still glittered in her eyes. The excitement which she was under held her in so strong a spell that neither her mind nor her body seemed to have any consciousness of fatigue. However verbose I may be in my description of her feelings, I can never describe a tithe of her thoughts or her sufferings. She suffered agonies that would fill closely printed volumes, bulky with a thousand pages, in that one horrible night. She underwent volumes of anguish, and doubt, and perplexity. Sometimes repeating the same chapters of her torments over and over again. Sometimes hurrying through a thousand pages of her misery without one pause, without one moment of breathing time. She



stood by the low fender in her boudoir, watching the minute hand of the clock, and waiting till it should be time for her to leave the house in safety.

"I will wait ten minutes," she said, "not a moment beyond, before I enter upon my new peril."

She listened to the wild roaring of the March wind, which seemed to have risen with the stillness and darkness of the night.

The hand slowly made its inevitable way to the figures which told that the ten minutes were past. It was exactly a quarter to twelve when my lady took her lamp in her hand, and stole softly from the room. Her footfall was as light as that of some graceful wild animal, and there was no fear of that airy step awakening any echo upon the carpeted stone corridors and staircase. She did not pause until she reached the vestibule upon the ground floor. Several doors opened out of this vestibule, which was octagon, like my lady's ante-chamber. One of these doors led into the library, and it was this door which Lady Audley opened softly and cautiously.

To have attempted to leave the house secretly by any of the principal outlets would have been simple madness, for the housekeeper herself superintended the barricading of the great doors, back and front. The secrets of the bolts, and bars, and chains, and bells which secured these doors, and provided for the safety of Sir Michael Audley's plate-room, the door of which was lined with sheet-iron, were known only to the servants who had to deal with them. But although all



these precautions were taken with the principal entrances to the citadel, a wooden shutter and a slender iron bar, light enough to be lifted by a child, were considered sufficient safeguard for the half-glass door which opened out of the breakfast-room into the gravelled pathway and smooth turf in the courtyard.

It was by this outlet that Lady Audley meant to make her escape. She could easily remove the bar and unfasten the shutter, and she might safely venture to leave the window ajar while she was absent. There was little fear of Sir Michael's awaking for some time, as he was a heavy sleeper in the earlier part of the night, and had slept more heavily than usual since his illness.

Lady Audley crossed the library, and opened the door of the breakfast-room which communicated with it. This latter apartment was one of the modern additions to the Court. It was a simple, cheerful chamber, with brightly-papered walls and pretty maple furniture, and was more occupied by Alicia than any one else. The paraphernalia of that young lady's favourite pursuits were scattered about the room — drawing materials, unfinished scraps of work, tangled skeins of silk, and all the other tokens of a careless damsel's presence; while Miss Audley's picture — a pretty crayon sketch of a rosy-faced hoyden in a riding-habit and hat — hung over the quaint Wedgwood ornaments on the chimney-piece. My lady looked upon these familiar objects with scornful hatred flaming in her blue eyes.

"How glad *she* will be if any disgrace befalls me!"



she thought; "how *she* will rejoice if I am driven out of this house!"

Lady Audley set the lamp upon a table near the fireplace, and went to the window. She removed the iron bar and the light wooden shutter, and then opened the glass door. The March night was black and moonless, and a gust of wind blew in upon her as she opened this door, and filled the room with its chilly breath, extinguishing the lamp upon the table.

"No matter," my lady muttered, "I could not have left it burning. I shall know how to find my way through the house when I come back. I have left all the doors ajar."

She stepped quickly out upon the smooth gravel, and closed the glass-door behind her. She was afraid lest that treacherous wind should blow to the door opening into the library, and thus betray her.

She was in the quadrangle now, with that chill wind sweeping against her, and swirling her silken garments round her with a shrill rustling noise, like the whistling of a sharp breeze against the sails of a yacht. She crossed the quadrangle and looked back—looked back for a moment at the fire-light gleaming through the rosy-tinted curtains in her boudoir, and the dim gleam of the lamp behind the mullioned windows in the room where Sir Michael Audley lay asleep.

"I feel as if I was running away," she thought. "I feel as if I was running away secretly in the dead of the night, to lose myself and be forgotten. Perhaps it would be wiser in me to run away, to take this man's



warning, and escape out of his power for ever. If I were to run away and disappear — as George Talboys disappeared. But where could I go? What would become of me? I have no money: my jewels are not worth a couple of hundred pounds, now that I have got rid of the best part of them. What could I do? I must go back to the old life, the old, hard, cruel, wretched life — the life of poverty, and humiliation, and vexation, and discontent. I should have to go back and wear myself out in that long struggle, and die — as my mother died, perhaps.”

My lady stood still for a moment on the smooth lawn between the quadrangle and the archway, with her head drooping upon her breast and her hands locked together, debating this question in the unnatural activity of her mind. Her attitude reflected the state of that mind — it expressed irresolution and perplexity. But presently a sudden change came over her; she lifted her head — lifted it with an action of defiance and determination.

“No, Mr. Robert Audley,” she said aloud, in a low, clear voice; “I will not go back — I will not go back. If the struggle between us is to be a duel to the death, you shall not find me drop my weapon.”

She walked with a firm and rapid step under the archway. As she passed under that massive arch, it seemed as if she disappeared into some black gulf that had waited open to receive her. The stupid clock struck twelve, and the solid masonry seemed to vibrate under its heavy strokes, as Lady Audley emerged upon



the other side, and joined Phœbe Marks, who had waited for her late mistress very near the gateway of the Court.

"Now, Phœbe," she said, "it is three miles from here to Mount Stanning, isn't it?"

"Yes, my lady."

"Then we can walk it in an hour."

Lady Audley had not stopped to say this: she was walking quickly along the avenue with her humble companion by her side. Fragile and delicate as she was in appearance, she was a very good walker. She had been in the habit of taking long country rambles with Mr. Dawson's children in her old days of dependence, and she thought very little of a distance of three miles.

"Your beautiful husband will sit up for you, I suppose, Phœbe?" she said, as they struck across an open field that was used as a short cut from Audley Court to the high road.

"Oh, yes, my lady; he's sure to sit up. He'll be drinking with the man, I dare say."

"The man! What man?"

"The man that's in possession, my lady."

"Ah, to be sure," said Lady Audley, indifferently.

It was strange that Phœbe's domestic troubles should seem so very far away from her thoughts at the time she was taking such an extraordinary step towards setting things right at the Castle Inn.

The two women crossed the field and turned into the high road. The way to Mount Stanning was very



hilly, and the long road looked black and dreary in the dark night; but my lady walked on with a desperate courage, which was no common constituent in her selfish, sensuous nature; but a strange faculty born out of her great despair. She did not speak again to her companion until they were close upon the glimmering lights at the top of the hill, one of which village lights, gleaming redly through a crimson curtain, marked out the particular window behind which it was likely that Luke Marks sat nodding drowsily over his liquor, and waiting for the coming of his wife.

"He has not gone to bed, Phœbe," said my lady, eagerly. "But there is no other light burning at the inn. I suppose Mr. Audley is in bed and asleep."

"Yes, my lady, I suppose so."

"You are sure he was going to stay at the Castle to-night?"

"Oh, yes, my lady. I helped the girl to get his room ready before I came away."

The wind, boisterous everywhere, was shriller and more pitiless in the neighbourhood of that bleak hill-top upon which the Castle Inn reared its rickety walls. The cruel blasts danced wildly round that frail erection. They disported themselves with the shattered pigeon-house, the broken weathercock, the loose tiles, and unshapely chimneys; they rattled at the window-panes, and whistled in the crevices; they mocked the feeble building from foundation to roof, and battered and banged and tormented it in their fierce gambols,



until it trembled and rocked with the force of their rough play.

Mr. Luke Marks had not troubled himself to secure the door of his dwelling-house before sitting down to drink with the man who held provisional possession of his goods and chattels. The landlord of the Castle Inn was a lazy, sensual brute, who had no thought higher than a selfish concern for his own enjoyments, and a virulent hatred of anybody who stood in the way of his gratification.

Phœbe pushed open the door with her hand, and went into the house, followed by my lady. The gas was flaring in the bar, and smoking the low, plastered ceiling. The door of the bar-parlour was half open, and Lady Audley heard the brutal laughter of Mr. Marks as she crossed the threshold of the inn.

"I'll tell him you're here, my lady," whispered Phœbe to her late mistress. "I know he'll be tipsy. You — you won't be offended, my lady, if he should say anything rude. You know it wasn't my wish that you should come."

"Yes, yes," answered Lady Audley, impatiently, "I know that. What should I care for his rudeness? Let him say what he likes."

Phœbe Marks pushed open the parlour door, leaving my lady in the bar close behind her.

Luke sat with his clumsy legs stretched out upon the hearth; with a glass of gin-and-water in one hand and the poker in the other. He had just thrust the poker into a great heap of black coals, and was



shattering them to make a blaze, when his wife appeared upon the threshold of the room.

He snatched the poker from between the bars, and made a half-drunken, half-threatening motion with it as he saw her.

"So you've condescended to come home at last, ma'am," he said; "I thought you was never coming no more."

He spoke in a thick and drunken voice, and was by no means too intelligible. He was steeped to the very lips in alcohol. His eyes were dim and watery; his hands were unsteady; his voice was choked and muffled with drink. A brute, even when most sober; a brute, even when on his best behaviour; he was ten times more brutal in his drunkenness, when the few restraints which held his ignorant, every-day brutality in check were flung aside in the insolent recklessness of intoxication.

"I — I've been longer than I intended to be, Luke," Phoebe answered, in her most conciliatory manner; "but I've seen my lady, and she's been very kind, and — and she'll settle this business for us."

"She's been very kind, has she?" muttered Mr. Marks, with a drunken laugh; "thank her for nothing. I know the vally of her kindness. She'd be uncommon kind, I dessay, if she warn't obligated to be it."

The man in possession, who had fallen into a maudlin and semi-unconscious state of intoxication upon about a third of the liquor that Mr. Marks had consumed, only stared in feeble wonderment at his



host and hostess. He sat near the table. Indeed, he had hooked himself on to it with his elbows, as a safeguard against sliding under it, and he was making inane attempts to light his pipe at the flame of a guttering tallow candle near him.

"My lady has promised to settle the business for us," Phœbe repeated, without noticing Luke's remarks; she knew her husband's dogged nature well enough by this time to know that it was worse than useless to try to stop him from doing or saying anything which his own stubborn will led him to do or say; "and she's come down here to see about it to-night, Luke," she added.

The poker dropped from the landlord's hand, and fell clattering amongst the cinders on the hearth.

"My lady Audley come here to-night," he said.

"Yes, Luke."

My lady appeared upon the threshold of the door as Phœbe spoke.

"Yes, Luke Marks," she said, "I have come to pay this man, and to send him about his business."

Lady Audley said these words in a strange semi-mechanical manner, very much as if she had learned the sentence by rote, and were repeating it without knowing what she said.

Mr. Marks gave a discontented growl, and set his empty glass down upon the table, with an impatient gesture.

"You might have given the money to Phœbe," he said, "as well as have brought it yourself. We don't



want no fine ladies up here, pryin' and pokin' their precious noses into everythink."

"Luke, Luke," remonstrated Phœbe, "when my lady has been so kind!"

"Oh, damn her kindness!" cried Mr. Marks; "it ain't her kindness as we want, gal, it's her money. She won't get no snivellin' gratitood from me. Whatever she does for us she does because she is obliged, and if she warn't obliged she wouldn't do it —"

Heaven knows how much more Luke Marks might have said, had not my lady turned upon him suddenly, and awed him into silence by the unearthly glitter of her beauty. Her hair had been blown away from her face, and, being of a light, feathery quality, had spread itself into a tangled mass that surrounded her forehead like a yellow flame. There was another flame in her eyes — a greenish light, such as might flash from the changing hued orbs of an angry mermaid.

"Stop," she cried. "I didn't come up here in the dead of the night to listen to your insolence. How much is this debt?"

"Nine pound."

Lady Audley produced her purse — a toy of ivory, silver, and turquoise — and took from it a bank-note and four sovereigns. She laid these upon the table.

"Let that man give me a receipt for the money," she said, "before I go."

It was some time before the man could be roused



into sufficient consciousness for the performance of this simple duty, and it was only by dipping a pen into the ink and pushing it between his clumsy fingers, that he was at last made to comprehend that his autograph was wanted at the bottom of the receipt which had been made out by Phœbe Marks. Lady Audley took the document as soon as the ink was dry, and turned to leave the parlour. Phœbe followed her.

"You musn't go home alone, my lady," she said. "You'll let me go with you?"

"Yes, yes, you shall go home with me."

The two women were standing near the door of the inn as my lady said this. Phœbe stared wonderingly at her patroness. She had expected that Lady Audley would be in a hurry to return home after settling this business which she had capriciously taken upon herself; but it was not so; my lady stood leaning against the inn door and staring into vacancy, and again Mrs. Marks began to fear that trouble had driven her late mistress mad.

A little Dutch clock in the bar struck one while Lady Audley lingered in this irresolute, absent manner.

She started at the sound and began to tremble violently.

"I think I am going to faint, Phœbe," she said; "where can I get some cold water?"

"The pump is in the washhouse, my lady, I'll run and get you a glass of water."



"No, no, no," cried my lady, clutching Phœbe's arm as she was about to run away upon this errand, "I'll get it myself. I must dip my head in a basin of water if I want to save myself from fainting. In which room does Mr. Audley sleep?"

There was something so irrelevant in this question that Phœbe Marks stared aghast at her mistress before she answered it.

"It was number three that I got ready, my lady — the front room — the room next to ours," she replied, after that pause of astonishment.

"Give me a candle," said my lady; "I'll go into your room, and get some water for my head. Stay where you are," she added authoritatively, as Phœbe Marks was about to show the way — "stay where you are, and see that that brute of a husband of yours doesn't follow me!"

She snatched the candle which Phœbe had lighted, from the girl's hand; and ran up the rickety, winding staircase which led to the narrow corridor upon the upper floor. Five bed-rooms opened out of this low-ceilinged, close-smelling corridor: the numbers of these rooms were indicated by squat black figures painted upon the upper panels of the doors. Lady Audley had driven to Mount Stanning to inspect the house, when she had bought the business for her servant's bridegroom, and she knew her way about the dilapidated old place; she knew where to find Phœbe's bed-room; but she stopped before the door of that other chamber which had been prepared for Mr. Robert Audley.



She stopped and looked at the number on the door. The key was in the lock, and her hand dropped upon it as if unconsciously. Then she suddenly began to tremble again, as she had trembled a few minutes before at the striking of the clock. She stood for a few moments trembling thus; with her hand still upon the key; then a horrible expression came over her face, and she turned the key in the lock; she turned it twice, double locking the door.

There was no sound from within; the occupant of the chamber made no sign of having heard that ominous creaking of the rusty key in the rusty lock.

Lady Audley hurried into the next room. She set the candle on the dressing-table, flung off her bonnet and slung it loosely across her arm; she went to the wash-hand-stand and filled the basin with water. She plunged her golden hair into this water, and then stood for a few moments in the centre of the room looking about her, with a white earnest face, and an eager gaze that seemed to take in every object in the poorly-furnished chamber. Phoebe's bedroom was certainly very shabbily furnished; she had been compelled to select all the most decent things for those best bedrooms which were set apart for any chance traveller who might stop for a night's lodging at the Castle Inn. But Mrs. Marks had done her best to atone for the lack of substantial furniture in her apartment by a superabundance of drapery. Crisp curtains of cheap chintz hung from the tent-bedstead; festooned draperies of the same material shrouded the narrow window,



shutting out the light of day, and affording a pleasant harbour for tribes of flies and predatory bands of spiders. Even the looking-glass, a miserably cheap construction which distorted every face whose owner had the hardihood to look into it, stood upon a draperied altar of starched muslin and pink glazed calico, and was adorned with frills of lace and knitted work.

My lady smiled as she looked at the festoons and furbelows which met her eye upon every side. She had reason, perhaps, to smile, remembering the costly elegance of her own apartments; but there was something in that sardonic smile that seemed to have a deeper meaning than any natural contempt for Phœbe's poor attempts at decoration. She went to the dressing-table and smoothed her wet hair before the looking-glass, and then put on her bonnet. She was obliged to place the flaming tallow candle very close to the lace furbelows about the glass, so close that the starched muslin seemed to draw the flame towards it by some power of attraction in its fragile tissue.

Phœbe waited anxiously by the inn-door for my lady's coming. She watched the minute hand of the little Dutch clock, wondering at the slowness of its progress. It was only ten minutes past one when Lady Audley came downstairs, with her bonnet on and her hair still wet, but without the candle.

Phœbe was immediately anxious about this missing candle.



"The light, my lady," she said; "you have left it up-stairs!"

"The wind blew it out as I was leaving your room," Lady Audley answered, quietly. "I left it there."

"In my room, my lady?"

"Yes."

"And it was quite out?"

"Yes, I tell you; why do you worry me about your candle? It is past one o'clock. Come."

She took the girl's arm, and half-led, half-dragged her from the house. The convulsive pressure of her slight hand held her companion as firmly as an iron vice could have held her. The fierce March wind banged to the door of the house, and left the two women standing outside it. The long black road lay bleak and desolate before them, dimly visible between the leafless hedges.

A walk of three miles' length upon a lonely country road, between the hours of one and two on a cold winter's morning, is scarcely a pleasant task for a delicate woman — a woman whose inclinations lean towards ease and luxury. But my lady hurried along the hard dry highway, dragging her companion with her as if she had been impelled by some horrible demoniac force which knew no abatement. With the black night above them — with the fierce wind howling round them, sweeping across a broad expanse of hidden country, blowing as if it had arisen simultaneously from every point of the compass, and making those



wretched wanderers the focus of its ferocity — the two women walked through the darkness down the hill upon which Mount Stanning stood, along a mile and a half of flat road, and then up another hill, on the western side of which Audley Court lay in that sheltered valley, which seemed to shut in the old house from all the clamour and hubbub of the every-day world.

My lady stopped upon the summit of this hill to draw breath and to clasp her hands upon her heart, in the vain hope that she might still its cruel beating. They were now within three quarters of a mile of the Court, and they had been walking for nearly an hour since they had left the Castle Inn.

Lady Audley stopped to rest with her face still turned towards the place of her destination. Phœbe Marks, stopping also, and very glad of a moment's pause in that hurried journey, looked back into the far darkness beneath which lay that dreary shelter which had given her so much uneasiness. As she did so, she uttered a shrill cry of horror, and clutched wildly at Lady Audley's cloak.

The night sky was no longer all dark. The thick blackness was broken by one patch of lurid light.

"My lady, my lady," cried Phœbe, pointing to this lurid patch, "do you see?"

"Yes, child, I see," answered Lady Audley trying to shake the clinging hands from her garments. "What is the matter?"

"It is a fire! — a fire, my lady."



"Yes, I'm afraid it is a fire. At Brentwood most likely. Let me go, Phœbe, it is nothing to us."

"Yes, yes, my lady, it's nearer than Brentwood — much nearer; it's at Mount Stanning."

Lady Audley did not answer. She was trembling again, with the cold, perhaps, for the wind had torn her heavy cloak away from her shoulders, and had left her slender figure exposed to the blast.

"It's at Mount Stanning, my lady," cried Phœbe Marks. "It's the Castle that's on fire — I know it is, I know it is. I thought of fire to-night, and I was fidgety and uneasy, for I knew this would happen some day. I wouldn't mind if it was only the wretched place, but there'll be life lost; there'll be life lost," sobbed the girl, distractedly. "There's Luke, too tipsy to help himself, unless others help him; there's Mr. Audley asleep —"

Phœbe Marks stopped suddenly at the mention of Robert's name, and fell upon her knees, clasping her uplifted hands, and appealing wildly to Lady Audley.

"Oh, my God!" she cried, "Say it's not true, my lady; say it isn't true. It's too horrible, it's too horrible, it's too horrible!"

"What's too horrible?"

"The thought that's in my mind; the dreadful thought that's in my mind."

"What do you mean, girl?" cried my lady, fiercely.

"Oh, God forgive me if I'm wrong!" the kneeling woman gasped, in detached sentences, "and God grant I may be! Why did you go up to the Castle to-night,



my lady? Why were you so set on going, against all I could say — you who are so bitter against Mr. Audley and against Luke, and who knew they were both under that roof? Oh, tell me that I do you a cruel wrong, my lady; tell me so — tell me; for as there is a heaven above me, I think that you went to that place to-night on purpose to set fire to it. Tell me that I'm wrong, my lady; tell me that I'm doing you a wicked wrong."

"I will tell you nothing except that you are a mad woman," answered Lady Audley, in a cold, hard voice. "Get up, fool, idiot, coward! Is your husband such a precious bargain that you should be grovelling there, lamenting and groaning for him? What is Robert Audley to you, that you behave like a maniac, because you think he is in danger? How do you know that the fire is at Mount Stanning? You see a red patch in the sky, and you cry out directly that your own paltry hovel is in flames; as if there were no place in the world that could burn except that. The fire may be at Brentwood, or further away — at Romford, or still further away; on the eastern side of London, perhaps. Get up, mad woman, and go back and look after your goods and chattels, and your husband and your lodger. Get up and go; I don't want you."

"Oh, my lady, my lady, forgive me," sobbed Phoebe; "there's nothing you can say to me that's hard enough for having done you such a wrong, even in my thoughts. I don't mind your cruel words — I don't mind anything if I'm wrong."



"Go back and see for yourself," answered Lady Audley, sternly. "I tell you again I don't want you."

She walked away in the darkness, leaving Phoebe Marks still kneeling upon the hard road, where she had cast herself in that agony of supplication. Sir Michael's wife walked towards the house in which her husband slept, with the red blaze lighting up the skies behind her, and with nothing but the blackness of the night before.



## CHAPTER VIII.

## The Bearer of the Tidings.

It was very late the next morning when Lady Audley emerged from her dressing-room, exquisitely dressed in a morning costume of delicate muslin, elaborate laces, and embroideries; but with a very pale face, and with half-circles of purple shadow under her eyes. She accounted for this pale face and these hollow eyes by declaring that she had sat up reading until a very late hour on the previous night.

Sir Michael and his young wife breakfasted in the library at a comfortable round table, wheeled close to the blazing fire; and Alicia was compelled to share this meal with her step-mother, however she might avoid that lady in the long interval between breakfast and dinner.

The March morning was bleak and dull, and a drizzling rain fell incessantly, obscuring the landscape, and blotting out the distance. There were very few letters by the morning's post; the daily newspapers did not arrive until noon; and such aids to conversation being missing, there was very little talk at the breakfast-table.

Alicia looked out at the drizzling rain drifting against the broad window-panes.

"No riding to-day," she said; "and no chance of



any callers to enliven us; unless that ridiculous Bob comes crawling through the wet from Mount Stanning."

Have you ever heard anybody, whom you knew to be dead, alluded to in a light, easy-going manner by another person who did not know of his death — alluded to as doing that or this — as performing some trivial every-day operation — when *you* know that he has vanished away from the face of this earth, and separated himself for ever from all living creatures and their common-place pursuits, in the awful solemnity of death? Such a chance allusion, insignificant though it may be, is apt to send a strange thrill of pain through the mind. The ignorant remark jars discordantly upon the hyper-sensitive brain; the King of Terrors is desecrated by that unwitting disrespect. Heaven knows what hidden reason my lady may have had for experiencing some such revulsion of feeling on the sudden mention of Mr. Audley's name; but her pale face blanched to a sickly white as Alicia Audley spoke of her cousin.

"Yes, he will come down here in the wet, perhaps," the young lady continued, "with his hat sleek and shining as if it had been brushed with a pat of fresh butter; and with white vapours steaming out of his clothes, and making him look like an awkward genie just let out of his bottle. He will come down here and print impressions of his muddy boots all over the carpet, and he'll sit on your Gobelin tapestry, my lady, in his wet overcoat; and he'll abuse you if you remonstrate, and will ask why people have chairs that



are not to be sat upon, and why you don't live in Fig-tree-court, and —"

Sir Michael Audley watched his daughter with a thoughtful countenance as she talked of her cousin. She very often talked of him, ridiculing him and inveighing against him in no very measured terms. But, perhaps, the baronet thought of a certain Signora Beatrice who very cruelly entreated a gentleman called Benedick, but who was, it may be, heartily in love with him at the same time.

"What do you think Major Melville told me when he called here yesterday, Alicia?" Sir Michael asked, presently.

"I haven't the remotest idea," replied Alicia, rather disdainfully. "Perhaps he told you that we should have another war before long, by Ged, sir; or, perhaps, he told you that we should have a new ministry, by Ged, sir, for that those fellows are getting themselves into a mess, sir; or that those other fellows were reforming this, and cutting down that, and altering the other in the army, until, by Ged, sir, we shall have no army at all, by-and-by — nothing but a pack of boys, sir, crammed up to the eyes with a lot of senseless schoolmasters' rubbish, and dressed in shell-jackets and calico helmets. Yes, sir, they're fighting in Oudh in calico helmets at this very day, sir."

"You're an impertinent minx, miss," answered the baronet. "Major Melville told me nothing of the kind; but he told me that a very devoted admirer of yours, a certain Sir Harry Towers, has forsaken his place in



Hertfordshire, and his hunting stable, and has gone on the Continent for a twelvemonth's tour."

Miss Audley flushed up suddenly at the mention of her old adorer, but recovered herself very quickly.

"He has gone on the Continent, has he?" she said, indifferently. "He told me that he meant to do so — if — if he didn't have everything his own way. Poor fellow! he's a dear, good-hearted, stupid creature, and twenty times better than that peripatetic, patent refrigerator, Mr. Robert Audley."

"I wish, Alicia, you were not so fond of ridiculing Bob," Sir Michael said, gravely. "Bob is a very good fellow, and I'm as fond of him as if he'd been my own son; and — and — I've been very uncomfortable about him lately. He has changed very much within the last few days, and he has taken all sorts of absurd ideas into his head, and my lady has alarmed me about him. She thinks —"

Lady Audley interrupted her husband with a grave shake of her head.

"It is better not to say too much about it yet awhile," she said; "Alicia knows what I think."

"Yes," rejoined Miss Audley, "my lady thinks that Bob is going mad; but I know better than that. He's not at all the sort of person to go mad. How should such a sluggish ditchpond of an intellect as his ever work itself into a tempest? He may moon about for the rest of his life, perhaps, in a tranquil state of semi-idiotcy, imperfectly comprehending who he is, and



where he's going, and what he's doing; but he'll never go mad."

Sir Michael did not reply to this. He had been very much disturbed by his conversation with my lady on the previous evening, and had silently debated the painful question in his mind ever since.

His wife — the woman he best loved and most believed in — had told him with all appearance of regret and agitation, her conviction of his nephew's insanity. He tried in vain to arrive at the conclusion he wished most ardently to attain; he tried in vain to think that my lady was misled by her own fancies, and had no foundation for what she said. But then, again, it suddenly flashed upon him, to think this was to arrive at a worse conclusion; it was to transfer the horrible suspicion from his nephew to his wife. She appeared to be possessed with an actual conviction of Robert's insanity. To imagine her wrong was to imagine some weakness in her own mind. The longer he thought of the subject the more it harassed and perplexed him. It was most certain that the young man had always been eccentric. He was sensible, he was tolerably clever, he was honourable and gentlemanlike in feeling, though perhaps, a little careless in the performance of certain minor social duties; but there were some slight differences, not easily to be defined, that separated him from other men of his age and position. Then, again, it was equally true that he had very much changed within the period that had succeeded the disappearance of George Talboys. He had



grown moody and thoughtful, melancholy and absent-minded. He had held himself aloof from society; had sat for hours without speaking; had talked at other times by fits and starts; and had excited himself unusually in the discussion of subjects which apparently lay far out of the region of his own life and interests. Then there was even another point which seemed to strengthen my lady's case against this unhappy young man. He had been brought up in the frequent society of his cousin, Alicia — his pretty, genial cousin — to whom interest, and one would have thought affection, naturally pointed as his most fitting bride. More than this, the girl had shown him, in the innocent guilelessness of a transparent nature, that on her side at least, affection was not wanting; and yet, in spite of all this, he had held himself aloof, and had allowed other men to propose for her hand, and to be rejected by her, and had still made no sign.

Now love is so very subtle an essence, such an indefinable metaphysical marvel, that its due force, though very cruelly felt by the sufferer himself, is never clearly understood by those who look on at his torments and wonder why he takes the common fever so badly. Sir Michael argued that because Alicia was a pretty girl and an amiable girl it was therefore extraordinary and unnatural in Robert Audley not to have duly fallen in love with her. This baronet — who, close upon his sixtieth birthday, had for the first time encountered that one woman who out of all the women in the world had power to quicken the pulses of his



heart — wondered why Robert failed to take the fever from the first breath of contagion that blew towards him. He forgot that there are men who go their ways unscathed amidst legions of lovely and generous women, to succumb at last before some harsh-featured virago, who knows the secret of that only philter which can intoxicate and bewitch him. He forgot that there are certain Jacks who go through life without meeting the Jill appointed for them by Nemesis, and die old bachelors perhaps, with poor Jill pining an old maid upon the other side of the party-wall. He forgot that love, which is a madness, and a scourge, and a fever, and a delusion, and a snare, is also a mystery, and very imperfectly understood by every one except the individual sufferer who writhes under its tortures. Jones, who is wildly enamoured of Miss Brown, and who lies awake at night until he loathes his comfortable pillow and tumbles his sheets into two twisted rags of linen in his agonies, as if he were a prisoner and wanted to wind them into impromptu ropes; this same Jones, who thinks Russell-square a magic place because his divinity inhabits it; who thinks the trees in that enclosure and the sky above it greener and bluer than any other trees or sky; and who feels a pang, yes, an actual pang, of mingled hope, and joy, and expectation, and terror when he emerges from Guilford-street, descending from the heights of Islington, into those sacred precincts; this very Jones is hard and callous towards the torments of Smith, who adores Miss Robinson, and cannot imagine what the infatuated



fellow can see in the girl. So it was with Sir Michael Audley. He looked at his nephew as a sample of a very large class of young men, and his daughter as a sample of an equally extensive class of feminine goods; and could not see why the two samples should not make a very respectable match. He ignored all those infinitesimal differences in nature which make the wholesome food of one man the deadly poison of another. How difficult it is to believe sometimes that a man doesn't like such and such a favourite dish. If, at a dinner-party, a meek-looking guest refuses early salmon and cucumber, or green peas in February, we set him down as a poor relation whose instincts warn him off those expensive plates. If an alderman were to declare that he didn't like green fat, he would be looked upon as a social martyr, a Marcus Curtius of the dinner-table, who immolated himself for the benefit of his kind. His fellow aldermen would believe in anything rather than an heretical distaste for the city ambrosia of the soup tureen. But there are people who dislike salmon, and whitebait, and spring ducklings, and all manner of old-established delicacies, and there are other people who affect eccentric and despicable dishes generally stigmatised as nasty.

Alas, my pretty Alicia, your cousin did not love you! He admired your rosy English face, and had a tender affection for you which might perhaps have expanded by and by into something warm enough for matrimony; that every-day jog-trot species of union which demands no very passionate devotion; but for a



sudden check which it had received in Dorsetshire. Yes, Robert Audley's growing affection for his cousin, a plant of very slow growth, I am fain to confess, had been suddenly dwarfed and stunted upon that bitter February day on which he had stood beneath the pine-trees talking to Clara Talboys. Since that day the young man had experienced an unpleasant sensation in thinking of poor Alicia. He looked at her as being in some vague manner an incumbrance upon the freedom of his thoughts; he had a haunting fear that he was in some tacit way pledged to her; that she had a species of claim upon him, which forbade to him the right of even thinking of another woman. I believe it was the image of Miss Audley presented to him in this light that goaded the young barrister into those outbursts of splenetic rage against the female sex which he was liable to at certain time. He was strictly honourable, so honourable that he would rather have immolated himself upon the altar of truth and Alicia than have done her the remotest wrong, though by so doing he might have secured his own happiness.

"If the poor little girl loves me," he thought, "and if she thinks that I love her, and has been led to think so by any word or act of mine, I am in duty bound to let her think so to the end of time, and to fulfil any tacit promise which I may have unconsciously made. I thought once — I meant once to — to make her an offer by and by, when this horrible mystery about George Talboys should have been cleared up and everything peacefully settled — but now —"



His thoughts would ordinarily wander away at this point of his reflections, carrying him where he never had intended to go; carrying him back under the pine-trees in Dorsetshire, and setting him once more face to face with the sister of his missing friend, and it was generally a very laborious journey by which he travelled back to the point from which he had strayed. It was so difficult for him to tear himself away from the stunted turf and the pine-trees.

"Poor little girl!" he would think on coming back to Alicia. "How good it is of her to love me; and how grateful I ought to be for her tenderness. How many fellows would think such a generous, loving heart the highest boon that earth could give them. There's Sir Harry Towers stricken with despair at his rejection. He would give me half his estate, all his estate, twice his estate, if he had it, to be in the shoes which I am so anxious to shake off my ungrateful feet. Why don't I love her? Why is it that although I know her to be pretty, and pure, and good, and truthful, I don't love her? Her image never haunts me, except reproachfully. I never see her in my dreams. I never wake up suddenly in the dead of the night with her eyes shining upon me and her warm breath upon my cheek, or with the fingers of her soft hand clinging to mine. No, I'm not in love with her; I *can't* fall in love with her."

He raged and rebelled against his ingratitude. He tried to argue himself into a passionate attachment for his cousin, but he failed ignominiously; and the more



he tried to think of Alicia the more he thought of Clara Talboys. I am speaking now of his feelings in the period that elapsed between his return from Dorsetshire and his visit to Grange Heath.

Sir Michael sat by the library fire after breakfast upon this wretched rainy morning, writing letters and reading the newspapers. Alicia shut herself in her own apartment to read the third volume of a novel. Lady Audley locked the door of the octagon ante-chamber, and roamed up and down the suite of rooms from the bed-room to the boudoir all through that weary morning.

She had locked the door to guard against the chance of any one coming in suddenly and observing her before she was aware — before she had had sufficient warning to enable her to face their scrutiny. Her pale face seemed to grow paler as the morning advanced. A tiny medicine chest was open upon the dressing-table, and little stoppered bottles of red lavender, sal-volatile, chloroform, chlorodyne, and ether were scattered about. Once my lady paused before this medicine-chest, and took out the remaining bottles, half absently perhaps, until she came to one which was filled with a thick dark liquid, and labelled, "Opium — Poison."

She trifled a long time with this last bottle; holding it up to the light, and even removing the stopper and smelling the sickly liquid. But she put it from her suddenly with a shudder.



"If I could!" she muttered, "if I could only do it! And yet why should I; *now?*"

She clenched her small hands as she uttered the last words, and walked to the window of the dressing-room, which looked straight towards that ivied archway under which any one must come who came from Mount Stanning to the Court.

There were smaller gates in the gardens which led into the meadows behind the Court; but there was no other way of coming from Mount Stanning or Brentwood than by the principal entrance.

The solitary hand of the clock over the archway was midway between one and two when my lady looked at it.

"How slow the time is," she said, wearily; "how slow, how slow! Shall I grow old like this, I wonder, with every minute of my life seeming like an hour?"

She stood for a few minutes watching the archway; but no one passed under it while she looked; and she turned impatiently away from the window to resume her weary wandering about the rooms.

Whatever fire that had been, which had reflected itself vividly in the black sky, no tidings of it had as yet come to Audley Court. The day was miserably wet and windy; altogether the very last day upon which even the most confirmed idler and gossip would care to venture out. It was not a market-day, and there were therefore very few passengers upon the road between Brentwood and Chelmsford; so that as yet no news of the fire, which had occurred in the dead of



the wintry night, had reached the village of Audley, or travelled from the village to the Court.

The girl with the rose-coloured ribbons came to the door of the ante-room to summon her mistress to luncheon; but Lady Audley only opened the door a little way, and intimated her intention of taking no luncheon.

"My head aches terribly, Martin," she said; "I shall go and lie down till dinner time. You may come at five to dress me."

Lady Audley said this with the predetermination of dressing at four, and thus dispensing with the services of her attendant. Amongst all privileged spies, a lady's-maid has the highest privileges. It is she who bathes Lady Theresa's eyes with eau-de-cologne after her ladyship's quarrel with the colonel; it is she who administers sal-volatile to Miss Fanny when Count Beaudesert, of the Blues, has jilted her. She has a hundred methods for the finding out of her mistress's secrets. She knows by the manner in which her victim jerks her head from under the hair-brush, or chafes at the gentlest administration of the comb, what hidden tortures are racking her breast — what secret perplexities are bewildering her brain. That well-bred attendant knows how to interpret the most obscure diagnoses of all mental diseases that can afflict her mistress; she knows when the ivory complexion is bought and paid for — when the pearly teeth are foreign substances fashioned by the dentist — when the glossy plaits are the relics of the dead, rather than



the property of the living; and she knows other and more sacred secrets than these. She knows when the sweet smile is more false than Madame Levison's enamel, and far less enduring — when the words that issue from between gates of borrowed pearl are more disguised and painted than the lips which help to shape them. When the lovely fairy of the ball-room re-enters her dressing-room after the night's long revelry, and throws aside her voluminous Burnous and her faded bouquet, and drops her mask; and like another Cinderella loses the glass-slipper, by whose glitter she has been distinguished, and falls back into her rags and dirt; the lady's-maid is by to see the transformation. The valet who took wages from the prophet of Korazin, must have seen his master sometimes unveiled; and must have laughed in his sleeve at the folly of the monster's worshippers.

Lady Audley had made no *confidante* of her new maid, and on this day of all others she wished to be alone.

She did lie down, she cast herself wearily upon the luxurious sofa in the dressing-room, and buried her face in the down pillows and tried to sleep. Sleep! — she had almost forgotten what it was, that tender restorer of tired nature, it seemed so long now since she had slept. It was only about eight-and-forty hours, perhaps, but it appeared an intolerable time. Her fatigue of the night before, and her unnatural excitement, had worn her out at last. She did fall asleep; she fell into a heavy slumber that was almost like stupor. She had



taken a few drops out of the opium bottle in a glass of water before lying down.

The clock over the mantelpiece chimed the quarter before four as she woke suddenly and started up, with the cold perspiration breaking out in icy drops upon her forehead. She had dreamt that every member of the household was clamouring at the door, eager to tell her of a dreadful fire that had happened in the night.

There was no sound but the flapping of the ivy leaves against the glass, the occasional falling of a cinder, and the steady ticking of the clock.

"Perhaps I shall be always dreaming these sort of dreams," my lady thought, "until the terror of them kills me!"

The rain had ceased, and the cold spring sunshine was glittering upon the windows. Lady Audley dressed herself rapidly but carefully. I do not say that even in her supremest hour of misery she still retained her pride in her beauty. It was not so; she looked upon that beauty as a weapon, and she felt that she had now double need to be well armed. She dressed herself in her most gorgeous silk; a voluminous robe of silvery, shimmering blue, that made her look as if she had been arrayed in moonbeams. She shook out her hair into feathery showers of glittering gold; and with a cloak of white cashmere about her shoulders, went down-stairs into the vestibule.

She opened the door of the library and looked in. Sir Michael Audley was asleep in his easy chair. As



my lady softly closed this door Alicia descended the stairs from her own room. The turret door was open, and the sun was shining upon the wet grass-plat in the quadrangle. The firm gravel-walks were already very nearly dry, for the rain had ceased for upwards of two hours.

"Will you take a walk with me in the quadrangle?" Lady Audley asked, as her step-daughter approached. The armed neutrality between the two women admitted of any chance civility such as this.

"Yes, if you please, my lady," Alicia answered, rather listlessly. "I have been yawning over a stupid novel all the morning, and shall be very glad of a little fresh air."

Heaven help the novelist whose fiction Miss Audley had been perusing, if he had no better critics than that young lady. She had read page after page without knowing what she had been reading; and had flung aside the volumes half-a-dozen times to go to the window and watch for that visitor whom she had so confidently expected.

Lady Audley led the way through the low doorway and on to the smooth gravel drive, by which carriages approached the house. She was still very pale, but the brightness of her dress and of her feathery golden ringlets distracted an observer's eyes from her pallid face. All mental distress is, with some show of reason, associated in our minds with loose, disordered garments, and dishevelled hair, and an appearance in every way the reverse of my lady's. Why had she



come out into the chill sunshine of the March afternoon to wander up and down that monotonous pathway with the step-daughter she hated? She came because she was under the dominion of a horrible restlessness, which would not suffer her to remain within the house waiting for certain tidings which she knew must too surely come. At first she had wished to ward them off — at first she had wished that strange convulsions of nature might arise to hinder their coming — that abnormal winter lightnings might wither and destroy the messenger who carried them — that the ground might tremble and yawn beneath his hastening feet, and that impassable gulfs might separate the spot from which the tidings were to come, and the place to which they were to be carried. She wished that the earth might stand still, and the paralysed elements cease from their natural functions; that the progress of time might stop; that the Day of Judgment might come, and that she might thus be brought before an unearthly tribunal, and so escape the intervening shame and misery of any earthly judgment. In the wild chaos of her brain, every one of these thoughts had held its place, and in her short slumber on the sofa in her dressing-room, she had dreamed all these things and a hundred other things, all bearing upon the same subject. She had dreamed that a brook, a tiny streamlet when she first saw it, flowed across the road between Mount Stanning and Audley, and gradually swelled into a river, and from a river became an ocean, till the village on the hill receded far away out of sight and only a great



waste of waters rolled where it once had been. She dreamt that she saw the messenger; now one person, now another, but never any probable person; hindered by a hundred hindrances; now startling and terrible; now ridiculous and trivial; but never either natural or probable; and going down into the quiet house with the memory of these dreams strong upon her, she had been bewildered by the stillness which had betokened that the tidings had not yet come.

And now her mind underwent a complete change. She no longer wished to delay that dreaded intelligence. She wished the agony, whatever it was to be, over and done with, the pain suffered, and the release attained. It seemed to her as if the intolerable day would never come to an end, as if her mad wishes had been granted, and the progress of time had actually stopped.

"What a long day it has been!" exclaimed Alicia, as if taking up the burden of my lady's thoughts; "nothing but drizzle and mist and wind! And now that it's too late for anybody to go out, it must needs be fine," the young lady added, with an evident sense of injury.

Lady Audley did not answer. She was looking at the stupid one-handed clock; and waiting for the news which must come sooner or later; which could not surely fail to come very speedily.

"They have been afraid to come and tell him," she thought; "they have been afraid to break the news to Sir Michael. Who will come to tell it, at last, I won-



der? The rector of Mount Stanning, perhaps; or the doctor; some important person, at least."

If she could have gone out into the leafless avenues, or on to the high road beyond them; if she could have gone so far as that hill upon which she had so lately parted with Phœbe, she would have gladly done so. She would rather have suffered anything than that slow suspense, that corroding anxiety, that metaphysical dry-rot in which heart and mind seemed to decay under an insufferable torture. She tried to talk; and by a painful effort contrived now and then to utter some common-place remark. Under any ordinary circumstances her companion would have noticed her embarrassment; but Miss Audley, happening to be very much absorbed by her own vexations, was quite as well inclined to be silent as my lady herself. The monotonous walk up and down the gravelled pathway suited Alicia's humour. I think that she even took a malicious pleasure in the idea that she was very likely catching cold, and that her cousin Robert was answerable for her danger. If she could have brought upon herself inflammation of the lungs, or ruptured blood-vessels, by that exposure to the chill March atmosphere, I think she would have felt a gloomy satisfaction in her sufferings.

"Perhaps Robert might care for me, if I had inflammation of the lungs," she thought. "He couldn't insult me by calling me a Bouncer then. Bouncers don't have inflammation of the lungs."



I believe she drew a picture of herself in the last stage of consumption, propped up by pillows in a great easy-chair, looking out of a window in the afternoon sunshine, with medicine bottles, a bunch of grapes and a Bible upon a table by her side; and with Robert, all contrition and tenderness, summoned to receive her farewell blessing. She preached a whole chapter to him in that parting benediction, talking a great deal longer than was in keeping with her prostrate state, and very much enjoying her dismal castle in the air. Employed in this sentimental manner, Miss Audley took very little notice of her step-mother, and the one hand of the blundering clock had slipped to six by the time Robert had been blessed and dismissed.

“Good gracious me,” she cried, suddenly — “six o’clock, and I’m not dressed.”

The half-hour bell rang in a cupola upon the roof while Alicia was speaking.

“I must go in, my lady,” she said, “Won’t you come?”

“Presently,” answered Lady Audley. “I’m dressed you see.”

Alicia ran off, but Sir Michael’s wife still lingered in the quadrangle; still waited for those tidings which were so long coming.

It was nearly dark. The blue mists of evening had slowly risen from the ground. The flat meadows were filled with a grey vapour, and a stranger might have fancied Audley Court a castle on the margin of a sea. Under the archway the shadows of fast-coming



night lurked darkly; like traitors waiting for an opportunity to glide stealthily into the quadrangle. Through the archway a patch of cold blue sky glimmered faintly, streaked by one line of lurid crimson, and lighted by the dim glitter of one wintry-looking star. Not a creature was stirring in the quadrangle but the restless woman, who paced up and down the straight pathways, listening for a footstep, whose coming was to strike terror to her soul. She heard it at last! — a footstep in the avenue upon the other side of the archway. But was it *the* footstep? Her sense of hearing, made unnaturally acute by excitement, told her that it was a man's footstep — told even more, that it was the tread of a gentleman; no slouching, lumbering pedestrian in hobnailed boots; but a gentleman who walked firmly and well.

Every sound fell like a lump of ice upon my lady's heart. She could not wait, she could not contain herself; she lost all self-control, all power of endurance, all capability of self-restraint; and she rushed towards the archway.

She paused beneath its shadow, for the stranger was close upon her. She saw him: O God! she saw him, in that dim evening light. Her brain reeled; her heart stopped beating. She uttered no cry of surprise, no exclamation of terror, but staggered backwards and clung for support to the ivied buttress of the archway. With her slender figure crouched into the angle formed by this buttress and the wall which it supported, she stood staring at the new-comer.



As he approached her more closely her knees sank under her, and she dropped to the ground; not fainting, or in any manner unconscious; but sinking into a crouching attitude, and still crushed into the angle of the wall; as if she would have made a tomb for herself in the shadow of that sheltering brickwork.

“My lady!”

The speaker was Robert Audley. He whose bedroom door she had double-locked seventeen hours before at the Castle Inn.

“What is the matter with you?” he said, in a strange, constrained manner. “Get up, and let me take you in-doors.”

He assisted her to rise; and she obeyed him, very submissively. He took her arm in his strong hand and led her across the quadrangle and into the lamp-lit hall. She shivered more violently than he had ever seen any woman shiver before; but she made no attempt at resistance to his will.

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## CHAPTER IX.

My Lady tells the Truth.

"Is there any room in which I can talk to you alone?" Robert Audley asked, as he looked dubiously round the hall.

My lady only bowed her head in answer. She pushed open the door of the library, which had been left ajar. Sir Michael had gone to his dressing-room to prepare for dinner after a day of lazy enjoyment; perfectly legitimate for an invalid. The apartment was quite empty, and only lighted by the blaze of the fire, as it had been upon the previous evening.

Lady Audley entered this room, followed by Robert, who closed the door behind him. The wretched shivering woman went to the fire-place and knelt down before the blaze, as if any natural warmth could have power to check that unnatural chill. The young man followed her, and stood beside her upon the hearth, with his arm resting upon the chimney-piece.

"Lady Audley," he said, in a voice whose icy sternness held out no hope of any tenderness or compassion, "I spoke to you last night very plainly; but you refused to listen to me. To-night I must speak to you still more plainly; and you must no longer refuse to listen to me."

My lady, crouching before the fire with her face



hidden in her hands, uttered a low sobbing sound which was almost a moan, but made no other answer.

"There was a fire last night at Mount Stanning, Lady Audley," the pitiless voice proceeded; "the Castle Inn, the house in which I slept, was burned to the ground. Do you know how I escaped perishing in that destruction?"

"No."

"I escaped by a most providential circumstance, which seems a very simple one. I did not sleep in the room which had been prepared for me. The place seemed wretchedly damp and chilly; the chimney smoked abominably when an attempt was made at lighting a fire; and I persuaded the servant to make me up a bed upon the sofa in the small ground-floor sitting-room which I had occupied during the evening."

He paused for a moment, watching the crouching figure. The only change in my lady's attitude was that her head had fallen a little lower.

"Shall I tell you by whose agency the destruction of the Castle Inn was brought about, my lady?"

There was no answer.

"Shall I tell you?"

Still the same obstinate silence.

"My Lady Audley," cried Robert, suddenly, "*you* were the incendiary. It was you whose murderous hand kindled those flames. It was you who thought by that thrice-horrible deed to rid yourself of me, your enemy and denouncer. What was it to you that other



lives might be sacrificed? If by a second massacre of Saint Bartholomew you could have ridded yourself of *me*, you would have freely sacrificed an army of victims. The day is past for tenderness and mercy. For you I can no longer know pity or compunction. So far as by sparing your shame I can spare others who must suffer by your shame, I will be merciful; but no further. If there were any secret tribunal before which you might be made to answer for your crimes, I would have little scruple in being your accuser: but I would spare that generous and high-born gentleman upon whose noble name your infamy would be reflected."

His voice softened as he made this allusion, and for a moment he broke down, but he recovered himself by an effort and continued —

"No life was lost in the fire of last night. I slept lightly, my lady, for my mind was troubled, as it has been for a long time, by the misery which I knew was lowering upon this house. It was I who discovered the breaking out of the fire in time to give the alarm and to save the servant girl and the poor drunken wretch, who was very much burnt in spite of my efforts, and who now lies in a precarious state at his mother's cottage. It was from him and from his wife that I learned who had visited the Castle Inn in the dead of the night. The woman was almost distracted when she saw me, and from her I discovered the particulars of last night. Heaven knows what other secrets of yours she may hold, my lady, or how easily they



might be extorted from her if I wanted her aid, which I do not. My path lies very straight before me. I have sworn to bring the murderer of George Talboys to justice: and I will keep my oath. I say that it was by your agency my friend met with his death. If I have wondered sometimes, as it was only natural I should, whether I was not the victim of some horrible hallucination; whether such an alternative was not more probable than that a young and lovely woman should be capable of so foul and treacherous a murder, all wonder is past. After last night's deed of horror, there is no crime you could commit, however vast and unnatural, which could make me wonder. Henceforth you must seem to me no longer a woman; a guilty woman with a heart which in its worst wickedness has yet some latent power to suffer and feel; I look upon you henceforth as the demoniac incarnation of some evil principle. But you shall no longer pollute this place by your presence. Unless you will confess what you are, and who you are, in the presence of the man you have deceived so long; and accept from him and from me such mercy as we may be inclined to extend to you; I will gather together the witnesses who shall swear to your identity, and at peril of any shame to myself and those I love, I will bring upon you the punishment of your crime."

The woman rose suddenly and stood before him erect and resolute; with her hair dashed away from her face and her eyes glittering.

"Bring Sir Michael!" she cried; "bring him here,



and I will confess anything — everything! What do I care? God knows I have struggled hard enough against you, and fought the battle patiently enough; but you have conquered, Mr. Robert Audley. It is a great triumph, is it not? a wonderful victory! You have used your cool, calculating, frigid, luminous intellect to a noble purpose. You have conquered — a MAD-WOMAN!”

“A madwoman!” cried Mr. Audley.

“Yes, a madwoman. When you say that I killed George Talboys, you say the truth. When you say that I murdered him treacherously and foully, you lie. I killed him because I AM MAD! because my intellect is a little way upon the wrong side of that narrow boundary-line between sanity and insanity; because when George Talboys goaded me, as you have goaded me; and reproached me, and threatened me; my mind, never properly balanced, utterly lost its balance; and *I was mad!* Bring Sir Michael; and bring him quickly. If he is to be told one thing, let him be told everything; let him hear the secret of my life!”

Robert Audley left the room to look for his uncle. He went in search of that honoured kinsman with God knows how heavy a weight of anguish at his heart, for he knew he was about to shatter the day-dream of his uncle's life; and he knew that our dreams are none the less terrible to lose, because they have never been the realities for which we have mistaken them. But even in the midst of his sorrow for Sir Michael, he could not help wondering at my lady's last words —



"the secret of my life." He remembered those lines in the letter written by Helen Talboys upon the eve of her flight from Wildernsea, which had so puzzled him. He remembered those appealing sentences — "You should forgive me, for you know *why* I have been so. You know the *secret* of my life."

He met Sir Michael in the hall. He made no attempt to prepare the way for the terrible revelation which the baronet was to hear. He only drew him into the fire-lit library, and there for the first time addressed him quietly thus: —

"Lady Audley has a confession to make to you, sir — a confession which I know will be a most cruel surprise, a most bitter grief. But it is necessary for your present honour, and for your future peace, that you should hear it. She has deceived you, I regret to say, most basely; but it is only right you should hear from her own lips any excuses which she may have to offer for her wickedness. May God soften this blow for you," sobbed the young man, suddenly breaking down; "I cannot!"

Sir Michael lifted his hand as if he would have commanded his nephew to be silent; but that imperious hand dropped feeble and impotent at his side. He stood in the centre of the fire-lit room, rigid and immovable.

"Lucy!" he cried, in a voice whose anguish struck like a blow upon the jarred nerves of those who heard it, as the cry of a wounded animal pains the listener



— "Lucy! tell me that this man is a madman! tell me so, my love, or I shall kill him!"

There was a sudden fury in his voice as he turned upon Robert, as if he could indeed have felled his wife's accuser to the earth with the strength of his up-lifted arm.

But my lady fell upon her knees at his feet; interposing herself between the baronet and his nephew, who stood leaning upon the back of an easy chair, with his face hidden by his hand.

"He has told you the truth," said my lady, "and he is not mad! I have sent for you that I may confess everything to you. I should be sorry for you if I could; for you have been very, very good to me; much better to me than I ever deserved; but I can't, I can't — I can feel nothing but my own misery. I told you long ago that I was selfish; I am selfish still — more selfish than ever in my misery. Happy, prosperous people may feel for others. I laugh at other people's sufferings; they seem so small compared to my own."

When first my lady had fallen on her knees, Sir Michael had attempted to raise her, and had remonstrated with her; but as she spoke he dropped into a chair close to the spot upon which she knelt, and with his hands clasped together, and with his head bent to catch every syllable of those horrible words, he listened as if his whole being had been resolved into that one sense of hearing.

"I must tell you the story of my life; in order to tell you why I have become the miserable wretch who



has no better hope than to be allowed to run away and hide in some desolate corner of the earth. I must tell you the story of my life," repeated my lady, "but you need not fear that I shall dwell long upon it. It has not been so pleasant to me that I should wish to remember it. When I was a very little child I remember asking a question which it was natural enough that I should ask, God help me! I asked where my mother was. I had a faint remembrance of a face, like what my own is now, looking at me when I was very little better than a baby; but I had missed the face suddenly, and had never seen it since. They told me that my mother was away. I was not happy, for the woman who had charge of me was a disagreeable woman, and the place in which we lived was a lonely place, a village upon the Hampshire coast, about seven miles from Portsmouth. My father, who was in the navy, only came now and then to see me; and I was left almost entirely to the charge of this woman, who was irregularly paid; and who vented her rage upon me when my father was behind-hand in remitting her money. So you see that at a very early age I found out what it was to be poor.

"Perhaps it was more from being discontented with my dreary life than from any wonderful impulse of affection, that I asked very often the same question about my mother. I always received the same answer — she was away. When I asked where, I was told that that was a secret. When I grew old enough to understand the meaning of the word death, I asked if



my mother was dead, and I was told — 'No, she was not dead; she was ill, and she was away.' I asked how long she had been ill, and I was told that she had been so some years; ever since I was a baby.

"At last the secret came out. I worried my foster-mother with the old question one day when the remittances had fallen very much in arrear, and her temper had been unusually tried. She flew into a passion; and told me that my mother was a madwoman; and that she was in a madhouse forty miles away. She had scarcely said this when she repented, and told me that it was not the truth, and that I was not to believe it, or to say that she had told me such a thing. I discovered afterwards that my father had made her promise most solemnly never to tell me the secret of my mother's fate.

"I brooded horribly upon the thought of my mother's madness. It haunted me by day and night. I was always picturing to myself this madwoman pacing up and down some prison cell, in a hideous garment that bound her tortured limbs. I had exaggerated ideas of the horror of her situation. I had no knowledge of the different degrees of madness; and the image that haunted me was that of a distraught and violent creature, who would fall upon me and kill me if I came within her reach. This idea grew upon me until I used to awake in the dead of the night, screaming aloud in an agony of terror, from a dream in which I had felt my mother's icy grasp upon my throat, and heard her ravings in my ear.



"When I was ten years old my father came to pay up the arrears due to my protectress, and to take me to school. He had left me in Hampshire longer than he had intended, from his inability to pay this money. So there again I felt the bitterness of poverty, and ran the risk of growing up an ignorant creature amongst coarse rustic children, because my father was poor."

My lady paused for a moment, but only to take breath, for she had spoken rapidly, as if eager to tell this hated story, and to have done with it. She was still on her knees, but Sir Michael made no effort to raise her.

He sat silent and immovable. What was this story that he was listening to? Whose was it, and to what was it to lead? It could not be his wife's; he had heard her simple account of her youth, and had believed it as he had believed in the Gospel. She had told him a very brief story of an early orphanage, and a long quiet, colourless youth spent in the conventual seclusion of an English boarding-school.

"My father came at last, and I told him what I had discovered. He was very much affected when I spoke of my mother. He was not what the world generally calls a good man, but I learned afterwards that he had loved his wife very dearly; and that he would have willingly sacrificed his life to her, and constituted himself her guardian, had he not been compelled to earn the daily bread of the madwoman and her child by the exercise of his profession. So here again I beheld what a bitter thing it is to be poor.



My mother, who might have been tended by a devoted husband, was given over to the care of hired nurses.

"Before my father sent me to school at Torquay, he took me to see my mother. This visit served at least to dispel the idea which had so often terrified me. I saw no raving, strait-waistcoated maniac, guarded by zealous gaolers; but a golden-haired, blue-eyed, girlish creature, who seemed as frivolous as a butterfly, and who skipped towards us with her yellow curls decorated with natural flowers, and saluted us with radiant smiles, and gay, ceaseless chatter.

"But she didn't know us. She would have spoken in the same manner to any stranger who had entered the gates of the garden about her prison-house. Her madness was an hereditary disease transmitted to her from her mother, who had died mad. She, my mother, had been, or had appeared sane up to the hour of my birth; but from that hour her intellect had decayed, until she had become what I saw her.

"I went away with the knowledge of this, and with the knowledge that the only inheritance I had to expect from my mother was — insanity!

"I went away with this knowledge in my mind, and with something more — a secret to keep. I was only a child of ten years old; but I felt all the weight of that burden. I was to keep the secret of my mother's madness; for it was a secret that might affect me injuriously in after-life. I was to remember this.

"I did remember this; and it was, perhaps, this that made me selfish and heartless; for I suppose I am



heartless. As I grew older I was told that I was pretty — beautiful — lovely — bewitching. I heard all these things at first indifferently; but by-and-by I listened to them greedily, and began to think that in spite of the secret of my life I might be more successful in the world's great lottery than my companions. I had learnt that which in some indefinite manner or other every school-girl learns sooner or later — I learned that my ultimate fate in life depended upon my marriage, and I concluded that if I was indeed prettier than my schoolfellows, I ought to marry better than any of them.

“I left school before I was seventeen years of age with this thought in my mind; and I went to live at the other extremity of England with my father, who had retired upon his half-pay, and had established himself at Wildernsea, with the idea that the place was cheap and select.

“The place was indeed select. I had not been there a month before I discovered that even the prettiest girl might wait a long time for a rich husband. I wish to hurry over this part of my life: I daresay I was very despicable. You and your nephew, Sir Michael, have been rich all your lives, and can very well afford to despise me; but I knew how far poverty can affect a life, and I looked forward with a sick terror to a life so affected. At last the rich suitor — the wandering prince came.”

She paused for a moment, and shuddered convulsively. It was impossible to see any of the changes



of her countenance, for her face was obstinately bent towards the floor. Throughout her long confession she never lifted it; throughout her long confession her voice was never broken by a tear. What she had to tell she told in a cold, hard tone; very much the tone in which some criminal, dogged and sullen to the last, might have confessed to a gaol chaplain.

"The wandering prince came," she repeated; "he was called George Talboys."

For the first time since his wife's confession had begun, Sir Michael Audley started. He began to understand it all now. A crowd of unheeded words and forgotten circumstances that had seemed too insignificant for remark or recollection, flashed back upon him as vividly as if they had been the leading incidents of his past life.

"Mr. George Talboys was a cornet in a dragoon regiment. He was the only son of a rich country gentleman. He fell in love with me, and married me three months after my seventeenth birthday. I think I loved him as much as it was in my power to love anybody; not more than I have loved you, Sir Michael; not so much; for when you married me you elevated me to a position that he could never have given me."

The dream was broken. Sir Michael Audley remembered that summer's evening, nearly two years ago, when he had first declared his love for Mr. Dawson's governess; he remembered the sick, half-shuddering sensation of regret and disappointment that had come



over him then; and he felt as if it had in some manner dimly foreshadowed the agony of to-night.

But I do not believe that even in his misery he felt that entire and unmitigated surprise, that utter revulsion of feeling that is felt when a good woman wanders away from herself, and becomes the lost creature whom her husband is bound in honour to abjure. I do not believe that Sir Michael Audley had ever *really* believed in his wife. He had loved her and admired her; he had been bewitched by her beauty and bewildered by her charms; but that sense of something wanting, that vague feeling of loss and disappointment which had come upon him on the summer's night of his betrothal, had been with him more or less distinctly ever since. I cannot believe that an honest man, however pure and single may be his mind, however simply trustful his nature, is ever really deceived by falsehood. There is beneath the voluntary confidence an involuntary distrust; not to be conquered by any effort of the will.

"We were married," my lady continued, "and I loved him very well, quite well enough to be happy with him as long as his money lasted, and while we were on the Continent, travelling in the best style and always staying at the best hotels. But when we came back to Wildernsea and lived with papa, and all the money was gone, and George grew gloomy and wretched, and was always thinking of his troubles, and appeared to neglect me, I was very unhappy; and it seemed as if this fine marriage had only given me a



twelve-month's gaiety and extravagance after all. I begged George to appeal to his father; but he refused. I persuaded him to try and get employment; and he failed. My baby was born, and the crisis which had been fatal to my mother arose for me. I escaped; but I was more irritable perhaps after my recovery; less inclined to fight the hard battle of the world; more disposed to complain of poverty and neglect. I did complain one day, loudly and bitterly. I upbraided George Talboys for his cruelty in having allied a helpless girl to poverty and misery; and he flew into a passion with me and ran out of the house. When I awoke the next morning I found a letter lying on the table by my bed, telling me that he was going to the Antipodes to seek his fortune, and that he would never see me again until he was a rich man.

"I looked upon this as a desertion, and I resented it bitterly — I resented it by hating the man who had left me with no protector but a weak, tipsy father, and with a child to support. I had to work hard for my living, and in every hour of labour — and what labour is more wearisome than the dull slavery of a governess? — I recognised a separate wrong done me by George Talboys. His father was rich; his sister was living in luxury and respectability; and I, his wife, and the mother of his son, was a slave allied for ever to beggary and obscurity. People pitied me; and I hated them for their pity. I did not love the child; for he had been left a burden upon my hands. The hereditary taint that was in my blood had never until this time



showed itself by any one sign or token; but at this time I became subject to fits of violence and despair. At this time I think my mind first lost its balance, and for the first time I crossed that invisible line which separates reason from madness. I have seen my father's eyes fixed upon me in horror and alarm. I have known him soothe me as only mad people and children are soothed, and I have chafed against his petty devices, I have resented even his indulgence.

"At last these fits of desperation resolved themselves into a desperate purpose. I determined to run away from this wretched home which my slavery supported. I determined to desert this father who had more fear of me than love for me. I determined to go to London, and lose myself in that great chaos of humanity.

"I had seen an advertisement in the *Times* while I was at Wildernsea, and I presented myself to Mrs. Vincent, the advertiser, under a feigned name. She accepted me, waiving all question as to my antecedents. You know the rest. I came here, and you made me an offer, the acceptance of which would lift me at once into the sphere to which my ambition had pointed ever since I was a school-girl, and heard for the first time that I was pretty.

"Three years had passed, and I had received no token of my husband's existence; for, I argued, that if he had returned to England, he would have succeeded in finding me under any name and in any place. I knew the energy of his character well enough to know this.



“I said, ‘I have a right to think that he is dead, or that he wishes me to believe him dead, and his shadow shall not stand between me and prosperity.’ I said this, and I became your wife, Sir Michael, with every resolution to be as good a wife as it was in my nature to be. The common temptations that assail and shipwreck some women had no terror for me. I would have been your true and pure wife to the end of time, though I had been surrounded by a legion of tempters. The mad folly that the world calls love had never had any part in my madness; and here at least extremes met, and the vice of heartlessness became the virtue of constancy.

“I was very happy in the first triumph and grandeur of my new position, very grateful to the hand that had lifted me to it. In the sunshine of my own happiness I felt, for the first time in my life, for the miseries of others. I had been poor myself, and I was now rich, and could afford to pity and relieve the poverty of my neighbours. I took pleasure in acts of kindness and benevolence. I found out my father’s address and sent him large sums of money, anonymously, for I did not wish him to discover what had become of me. I availed myself to the full of the privilege your generosity afforded me. I dispensed happiness on every side. I saw myself loved as well as admired; and I think I might have been a good woman for the rest of my life, if fate would have allowed me to be so.

“I believe that at this time my mind regained its just balance. I had watched myself very closely since



leaving Wildernsea; I had held a check upon myself. I had often wondered, while sitting in the surgeon's quiet family circle, whether any suspicion of that invisible hereditary taint had ever occurred to Mr. Dawson.

"Fate would not suffer me to be good. My destiny compelled me to be a wretch. Within a month of my marriage, I read in one of the Essex papers of the return of a certain Mr. Talboys, a fortunate gold-seeker, from Australia. The ship had sailed at the time I read the paragraph. What was to be done?

"I said just now that I knew the energy of George's character. I knew that the man who had gone to the antipodes, and won a fortune for his wife, would leave no stone unturned in his efforts to find her. It was hopeless to think of hiding myself from him.

"Unless he could be induced to believe that I was dead, he would never cease in his search for me.

"My brain was dazed as I thought of my peril. Again the balance trembled; again the invisible boundary was passed; again I was mad.

"I went down to Southampton and found my father, who was living there with my child. You remember how Mrs. Vincent's name was used as an excuse for this hurried journey, and how it was contrived that I should go with no other escort than Phoebe Marks, whom I left at the hotel while I went to my father's house.

"I confided to my father the whole secret of my peril. He was not very much shocked at what I had



done, for poverty had perhaps blunted his sense of honour and principle. He was not very much shocked; but he was frightened; and he promised to do all in his power to assist me in my horrible emergency.

"He had received a letter addressed to me at Wildernsea, by George, and forwarded from there to my father. This letter had been written within a few days of the sailing of the *Argus*, and it announced the probable date of the ship's arrival at Liverpool. This letter gave us, therefore, data upon which to act.

"We decided at once upon the first step. This was that on the date of the probable arrival of the *Argus*, or a few days later, an advertisement of my death should be inserted in the *Times*.

"But almost immediately after deciding upon this, we saw that there were fearful difficulties in the carrying out of such a simple plan. The date of the death, and the place in which I died, must be announced, as well as the death itself. George would immediately hurry to that place, however distant it might be, however comparatively inaccessible, and the shallow falsehood would be discovered.

"I knew enough of his sanguine temperament, his courage and determination, his readiness to hope against hope, to know that unless he saw the grave in which I was buried, and the register of my death, he would never believe that I was lost to him.

"My father was utterly dumfounded and helpless. He could only shed childish tears of despair and terror. He was of no use to me in this crisis.



"I was hopeless of any issue out of my difficulty. I began to think that I must trust to the chapter of accidents; and hope that amongst other obscure corners of the earth, Audley Court might remain undreamt-of by my husband.

"I sat with my father, drinking tea with him in his miserable hovel, and playing with the child, who was pleased with my dress and jewels, but quite unconscious that I was anything but a stranger to him. I had the boy in my arms, when a woman who attended him came to fetch him that she might make him more fit to be seen by the lady, as she said.

"I was anxious to know how the boy was treated, and I detained this woman in conversation with me, while my father dozed over the tea-table.

"She was a pale-faced, sandy-haired woman, of about five-and-forty; and she seemed very glad to get the chance of talking to me as long as I pleased to allow her. She soon left off talking of the boy, however, to tell me her own troubles. She was in very great trouble, she told me. Her eldest daughter had been obliged to leave her situation from ill-health; in fact, the doctor said the girl was in a decline; and it was a hard thing for a poor widow who had seen better days to have a sick daughter to support, as well as a family of young children.

"I let the woman run on for a long time in this manner, telling me the girl's ailments, and the girl's age, and the girl's doctor's stuff, and piety, and sufferings, and a great deal more. But I neither listened



to her nor heeded her. I heard her, but only in a far-away manner, as I heard the traffic in the street, or the ripple of the stream at the bottom of it. What were this woman's troubles to me? I had miseries of my own; and worse miseries than *her* coarse nature could ever have to endure. These sort of people always had sick husbands or sick children, and expected to be helped in their illnesses by the rich. It was nothing out of the common. I was thinking this; and I was just going to dismiss the woman with a sovereign for her sick daughter; when an idea flashed upon me with such painful suddenness that it sent the blood surging up to my brain, and set my heart beating, as it only beats when I am mad.

"I asked the woman her name. She was a Mrs. Plowson, and she kept a small general shop, she said, and only ran in now and then to look after Georgey, and to see that the little maid-of-all-work took care of him. Her daughter's name was Matilda. I asked her several questions about this girl Matilda, and I ascertained that she was four-and-twenty, that she had always been consumptive, and that she was now, as the doctor said, going off in a rapid decline. He had declared that she could not last much more than a fortnight.

"It was in three weeks that the ship that carried George Talboys was expected to anchor in the Mersey.

"I need not dwell much upon this business. I visited the sick girl. She was fair and slender. Her



description, carelessly given, might tally nearly enough with my own; though she bore no shadow of resemblance to me, except in these two particulars. I was received by the girl as a rich lady who wished to do her service. I bought the mother, who was poor and greedy, and who for a gift of money, more money than she had ever before received, consented to submit to anything I wished. Upon the second day after my introduction to this Mrs. Plowson, my father went over to Ventnor, and hired lodgings for his invalid daughter and her little boy. Early the next morning he carried over the dying girl and Georgey, who had been bribed to call her 'mamma.' She entered the house as Mrs. Talboys; she was attended by a Ventnor medical man as Mrs. Talboys; she died, and her death and burial were registered in that name. The advertisement was inserted in the *Times*, and upon the second day after its insertion George Talboys visited Ventnor, and ordered the tombstone which at this hour records the death of his wife, Helen Talboys."

Sir Michael Audley rose slowly, and with a stiff, constrained action, as if every physical sense had been benumbed by that one sense of misery.

"I cannot hear any more," he said, in a hoarse whisper; "if there is anything more to be told, I cannot hear it. Robert, it is you who have brought about this discovery, as I understand. I want to know nothing more. Will you take upon yourself the duty of providing for the safety and comfort of this lady, whom I have thought my wife? I need not ask you



to remember in all you do, that I have loved her very dearly and truly. I cannot say farewell to her. I will not say it until I can think of her without bitterness — until I can pity her; as I now pray that God may pity her this night.”

Sir Michael walked slowly from the room. He did not trust himself to look at that crouching figure. He did not wish to see the creature whom he had cherished. He went straight to his dressing-room, rang for his valet, and ordered him to pack a portmanteau, and make all necessary arrangements for accompanying his master by the last up-train.

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## CHAPTER X.

The Hush that succeeds the Tempest.

ROBERT AUDLEY followed his uncle into the vestibule after Sir Michael had spoken those few quiet words which sounded the death-knell of his hope and love. Heaven knows how much the young man had feared the coming of this day. It had come; and though there had been no great outburst of despair, no whirlwind of stormy grief, no loud tempest of anguish and tears, Robert took no comforting thought from the unnatural stillness. He knew enough to know that Sir Michael Audley went away with the barbed arrow, which his nephew's hand had sent home to its aim, rankling in his tortured heart; he knew that this strange and icy calm was the first numbness of a heart stricken by a grief so unexpected as for a time to be rendered almost incomprehensible by a blank stupor of astonishment. He knew that when this dull quiet had passed away, when little by little, and one by one, each horrible feature of the sufferer's sorrow became first dimly apparent and then terribly familiar to him, the storm would burst in fatal fury, and tempests of tears and cruel thunder-claps of agony would rend that generous heart.

Robert had heard of cases in which men of his uncle's age had borne some great grief, as Sir Michael



had borne this, with a strange quiet; and had gone away from those who would have comforted them, and whose anxieties have been relieved by this patient stillness, to fall down upon the ground and die under the blow which at first had only stunned them. He remembered cases in which paralysis and apoplexy had stricken men as strong as his uncle in the first hour of the horrible affliction; and he lingered in the lamp-lit vestibule, wondering whether it was not his duty to be with Sir Michael — to be near him, in case of any emergency, and to accompany him wherever he went.

Yet, would it be wise to force himself upon that grey-headed sufferer in this cruel hour, in which he had been awakened from the one delusion of a blameless life to discover that he had been the dupe of a false face, and the fool of a nature which was too coldly mercenary, too cruelly heartless, to be sensible of its own infamy?

"No," thought Robert Audley, "I will not intrude upon the anguish of this wounded heart. There is humiliation mingled with this bitter grief. It is better he should fight the battle alone. I have done what I believe to have been my solemn duty, yet I should scarcely wonder if I had rendered myself for ever hateful to him. It is better he should fight the battle alone. I can do nothing to make the strife less terrible. Better that it should be fought alone."

While the young man stood with his hand upon the library door, still half doubtful whether he should



follow his uncle or re-enter the room in which he had left that more wretched creature, whom it had been his business to unmask, Alicia Audley opened the dining-room door, and revealed to him the old-fashioned oak-paneled apartment, the long table covered with snowy damask, and bright with a cheerful glitter of glass and silver.

"Is papa coming to dinner?" asked Miss Audley. "I'm so hungry; and poor Tomlins has sent up three times to say the fish will be spoiled. It must be reduced to a species of isinglass soup by this time, I should think," added the young lady, as she came out into the vestibule with the *Times* newspaper in her hand.

She had been sitting by the fire reading the paper, and waiting for her seniors to join her at the dinner-table.

"Oh, it's you, Mr. Robert Audley," she remarked, indifferently. "You dine with us, of course. Pray go and find papa. It must be nearly eight o'clock, and we are supposed to dine at six."

Mr. Audley answered his cousin rather sternly. Her frivolous manner jarred upon him, and he forgot in his irrational displeasure that Miss Audley had known nothing of the terrible drama which had been so long enacting under her very nose.

"Your papa has just endured a very great grief, Alicia," the young man said, gravely.

The girl's arch, laughing face changed in a mo-



ment to a tenderly earnest look of sorrow and anxiety. Alicia Audley loved her father very dearly.

"A grief!" she exclaimed; "papa grieved? Oh! Robert, what has happened?"

"I can tell you nothing yet, Alicia," Robert answered, in a low voice.

He took his cousin by the wrist, and drew her into the dining-room as he spoke. He closed the door carefully behind him before he continued; —

"Alicia, can I trust you?" he asked, earnestly.

"Trust me to do what?"

"To be a comfort and a friend to your poor father under a very heavy affliction."

"YES!" cried Alicia, passionately. "How can you ask me such a question? Do you think there is anything I would not do to lighten any sorrow of my father's? Do you think there is anything I would not suffer if my suffering could lighten his?"

The rushing tears rose to Miss Audley's bright grey eyes as she spoke.

"Oh, Robert! Robert! could you think so badly of me as to think that I would not try to be a comfort to my father in his grief?" she said, reproachfully.

"No, no, my dear," answered the young man, quietly; "I never doubted your affection, I only doubted your discretion. May I rely upon that?"

"You may, Robert," said Alicia, resolutely.

"Very well, then, my dear girl, I will trust you. Your father is going to leave the Court, for a time at least. The grief which he has just endured — a sud-



den and an unlooked-for sorrow, remember — has no doubt made this place hateful to him. He is going away; but he must not go alone, must he, Alicia?"

"Alone? no! no! But I suppose my lady —"

"Lady Audley will not go with him," said Robert, gravely; "he is about to separate himself from her."

"For a time?"

"No; for ever."

"Separate himself from her for ever!" exclaimed Alicia. "Then this grief —"

"Is connected with Lady Audley. Lady Audley is the cause of your father's sorrow."

Alicia's face, which had been pale before, flushed crimson. Sorrow, of which my lady was the cause — a sorrow which was to separate Sir Michael for ever from his young wife! There had been no quarrel between them — there had never been anything but harmony and sunshine between Lucy Audley and her generous husband. This sorrow must surely then have arisen from some sudden discovery; it was, no doubt, a sorrow associated with disgrace. Robert Audley understood the meaning of that vivid blush.

"You will offer to accompany your father wherever he may choose to go, Alicia," he said. "You are his natural comforter at such a time as this, but you will best befriend him in this hour of trial by avoiding all intrusion upon his grief. Your very ignorance of the particulars of that grief will be a security for your discretion. Say nothing to your father that you might not have said to him two years ago, before he married



a second wife. Try and be to him what you were before the woman in yonder room came between you and your father's love."

"I will," murmured Alicia, "I will."

"You will naturally avoid all mention of Lady Audley's name. If your father is often silent, be patient; if it sometimes seem to you that the shadow of this great sorrow will never pass away from his life, be patient still; and remember that there can be no better hope of a cure for his grief than the hope that his daughter's devotion may lead him to remember there is one woman upon this earth who will love him truly and purely until the last."

"Yes, yes, Robert, dear cousin, I will remember."

Mr. Audley, for the first time since he had been a schoolboy, took his cousin in his arms and kissed her broad forehead.

"My dear Alicia," he said, "do this, and you will make me happy. I have been in some measure the means of bringing this sorrow upon your father. Let me hope that it is not an enduring one. Try and restore my uncle to happiness, Alicia, and I will love you more dearly than brother ever loved a noble-hearted sister and a brotherly affection may be worth having, perhaps, after all, my dear, though it is very different to poor Sir Harry's enthusiastic worship."

Alicia's head was bent and her face hidden from her cousin while he spoke; but she lifted her head when he had finished, and looked him full in the face



with a smile that was only the brighter for her eyes being filled with tears.

"You are a good fellow, Bob," she said: "and I've been very foolish and wicked to feel angry with you, because —"

The young lady stopped suddenly.

"Because what, my dear?" asked Mr. Audley.

"Because I'm silly, cousin Robert," Alicia said quickly; "never mind that, Bob; I'll do all you wish, and it shall not be my fault if my dearest father doesn't forget his troubles before long. I'd go to the end of the world with him, poor darling, if I thought there was any comfort to be found for him in the journey. I'll go and get ready directly. Do you think papa will go to-night?"

"Yes, my dear; I don't think Sir Michael will rest another night under this roof, yet awhile."

"The mail goes at twenty minutes past nine," said Alicia; "we must leave the house in an hour if we are to travel by it. I shall see you again before we go, Robert."

"Yes, dear."

Miss Audley ran off to her room to summon her maid, and make all necessary preparations for the sudden journey, of whose ultimate destination she was as yet quite ignorant.

She went heart and soul into the carrying out of the duty which Robert had dictated to her. She assisted in the packing of her portmanteaus, and hopelessly bewildered her maid by stuffing silk dresses into



her bonnet boxes, and satin shoes into her dressing-case. She roamed about her rooms gathering together drawing materials, music-books, needlework, hair-brushes, jewellery, and perfume-bottles, very much as she might have done had she been about to sail for some savage country devoid of all civilised resources. She was thinking all the time of her father's unknown grief; and perhaps a little of the serious face and earnest voice which had that night revealed her cousin Robert to her in a new character.

Mr. Audley went up-stairs after his cousin, and found his way to Sir Michael's dressing-room. He knocked at the door and listened, heaven knows how anxiously, for the expected answer. There was a moment's pause, during which the young man's heart beat loud and fast, and then the door was opened by the baronet himself. Robert saw that his uncle's valet was already hard at work preparing for his master's hurried journey.

Sir Michael came out into the corridor.

"Have you anything more to say to me, Robert?" he asked, quietly.

"I only came to ascertain if I could assist in any of your arrangements. You go to London by the mail?"

"Yes."

"Have you any idea of where you will stay?"

"Yes, I shall stop at the Clarendon; I am known there. Is that all you have to say?"

"Yes; except that Alicia will accompany you."



"Alicia!"

"She could not very well stay here, you know, just now. It would be best for her to leave the Court until —"

"Yes, yes, I understand," interrupted the baronet; "but is there nowhere else that she could go, — must she be with me?"

"She could go nowhere else so immediately; and she would not be happy anywhere else."

"Let her come, then," said Sir Michael, "let her come."

He spoke in a strange subdued voice, and with an apparent effort; as if it were painful to him to have to speak at all. As if all this ordinary business of life were a cruel torture to him; and jarred so much upon his grief as to be almost worse to bear than that grief itself.

"Very well, my dear uncle, then all is arranged; Alicia will be ready to start at nine o'clock."

"Very good, very good," muttered the baronet; "let her come if she pleases; poor child, let her come."

He sighed heavily as he spoke in that half-pitying tone of his daughter. He was thinking how comparatively indifferent he had been towards that only child for the sake of the woman now shut in the fire-lit room below.

"I shall see you again before you go, sir," said Robert; "I will leave you till then."

"Stay!" said Sir Michael, suddenly; "have you told Alicia?"



"I have told her nothing; except that you are about to leave the Court for some time."

"You are very good, my boy, you are very good," the baronet murmured in a broken voice.

He stretched out his hand. His nephew took it in both his own, and pressed it to his lips.

"Oh, sir! how can I ever forgive myself?" he said; "how can I ever cease to hate myself for having brought this grief upon you?"

"No, no, Robert, you did right — you did right; I wish that God had been so merciful to me as to take my miserable life before this night; but you did right."

"Sir Michael re-entered his dressing-room, and Robert slowly returned to the vestibule. He paused upon the threshold of that chamber in which he had left Lucy, Lady Audley; otherwise Helen Talboys, the wife of his lost friend.

She was lying upon the floor; upon the very spot on which she had crouched at her husband's feet telling her guilty story. Whether she was in a swoon; or whether she lay there in the utter helplessness of her misery; Robert scarcely cared to know. He went out into the vestibule, and sent one of the servants to look for her maid, the smart be-ribboned damsel, who was loud in wonder and consternation at the sight of her mistress.

"Lady Audley is very ill," he said; "take her to her room and see that she does not leave it to-night. You will be good enough to remain near her; but do



not either talk to her, or suffer her to excite herself by talking."

My lady had not fainted; she allowed the girl to assist her, and rose from the ground upon which she had grovelled. Her golden hair fell in loose, dishevelled masses about her ivory throat and shoulders; her face and lips were colourless; her eyes terrible in their unnatural light.

"Take me away," she said, "and let me sleep! Let me sleep, for my brain is on fire!"

As she was leaving the room with her maid, she turned and looked at Robert. "Is Sir Michael gone?" she asked.

"He will leave in half an hour."

"There were no lives lost in the fire at Mount Stanning?"

"None."

"I am glad of that."

"The landlord of the house, Marks, was very terribly burned, and lies in a precarious state at his mother's cottage; but he may recover."

"I am glad of that — I am glad no life was lost. Good-night, Mr. Audley."

"I shall ask to see you for half an hour's conversation in the course of to-morrow, my lady?"

"Whenever you please. Good-night."

"Good-night."

She went away, quietly leaning upon her maid's shoulder, and leaving Robert with a sense of strange bewilderment that was very painful to him.



He sat down by the broad hearth upon which the red embers were fading, and wondered at the change in that old house which, until the day of his friend's disappearance, had been so pleasant a home for all who sheltered beneath its hospitable roof. He sat brooding over that desolate hearth, and trying to decide upon what must be done in this sudden crisis. He sat, helpless and powerless to determine upon any course of action, lost in a dull reverie, from which he was aroused by the sound of carriage wheels driving up to the little turret entrance.

The clock in the vestibule struck nine as Robert opened the library-door. Alicia had just descended the stairs with her maid, a rosy-faced country girl.

"Good-by, Robert," said Miss Audley, holding out her hand to her cousin; "good-by, and God bless you! You may trust me to take care of papa."

"I am sure I may. God bless you, my dear."

For the second time that night Robert Audley pressed his lips to his cousin's candid forehead; and for the second time the embrace was of a brotherly or paternal character; rather than the rapturous proceeding which it would have been had Sir Harry Towers been the privileged performer.

It was five minutes past nine when Sir Michael came down-stairs, followed by his valet, grave and grey-haired like himself. The baronet was pale, but calm and self-possessed. The hand which he gave to his nephew was as cold as ice; but it was with a steady voice that he bade the young man good-by.



"I leave all in your hands, Robert," he said, as he turned to leave the house in which he had lived so long. "I may not have heard the end; but I have heard enough. Heaven knows I have no need to hear more. I leave all to you, but you will not be cruel — you will remember how much I loved —"

His voice broke huskily before he could finish the sentence.

"I will remember you in everything, sir," the young man answered. "I will do everything for the best."

A treacherous mist of tears blinded him and shut out his uncle's face, and in another minute the carriage had driven away, and Robert Audley sat alone in the dark library, where only one red spark glowed amongst the pale-grey ashes. He sat alone, trying to think what he ought to do, and with the awful responsibility of a wicked woman's fate upon his shoulders.

"Good heavens," he thought; "surely this must be God's judgment upon the purposeless, vacillating life I led up to the seventh day of last September. Surely this awful responsibility has been forced upon me in order that I may humble myself to an offended Providence, and confess that a man cannot choose his own life. He cannot say, 'I will take existence lightly, and keep out of the way of the wretched, mistaken, energetic creatures, who fight so heartily in the great battle.' He cannot say, 'I will stop in the tents while the strife is fought, and laugh at the fools who are trampled down in the useless struggle.' He cannot do this. He



can only do, humbly and fearfully, that which the Maker who created him has appointed for him to do. If he has a battle to fight, let him fight it faithfully; but woe betide him if he skulks when his name is called in the mighty muster-roll; woe betide him if he hides in the tents when the tocsin summons him to the scene of war!"

One of the servants brought candles into the library, and relighted the fire; but Robert Audley did not stir from his seat by the hearth. He sat as he had often sat in his chambers in Fig-tree Court, with his elbows resting upon the arms of his chair, and his chin upon his hand.

But he lifted his head as the servant was about to leave the room.

"Can I send a telegram from here to London?" he asked.

"It can be sent from Brentwood, sir, — not from here."

Mr. Audley looked at his watch, thoughtfully.

"One of the men can ride over to Brentwood, sir, if you wish any message to be sent."

"I do wish to send a message; will you manage it for me, Richards?"

"Certainly, sir."

"You can wait, then, while I write the message?"

"Yes, sir."

The man brought writing materials from one of the side-tables, and placed them before Mr. Audley.

Robert dipped a pen in the ink, and stared thought-



fully at one of the candles for a few moments before he began to write.

The message ran thus: —

“From Robert Audley, of Audley Court, Essex, to Francis Wilmington, of Paper Buildings, Temple.

“Dear Wilmington, if you know any physician, experienced in cases of mania, and to be trusted with a secret, be so good as to send me his address by telegraph.”

Mr. Audley sealed this document in a stout envelope, and handed it to the man, with a sovereign.

“You will see that this is given to a trustworthy person, Richards,” he said, “and let the man wait at the station for the return message. He ought to get it in an hour and a half.”

Mr. Richards, who had known Robert Audley in jackets and turn-down collars, departed to execute his commission. Heaven forbid that we should follow him into the comfortable servants’ hall at the Court, where the household sat round the blazing fire, discussing in utter bewilderment the events of the day.

Nothing could be wider from the truth than the speculations of these worthy people. What clue had they to the mystery of that fire-lit room in which a guilty woman had knelt at their master’s feet to tell the story of her sinful life? They only knew that which Sir Michael’s valet had told them of this sudden journey. How his master was as pale as a sheet, and spoke in a strange voice that didn’t sound like his own, somehow, and how you might have knocked him



— Mr. Parsons, the valet — down with a feather, if you had been minded to prostrate him by the aid of so feeble a weapon.

The wiseheads of the servants' hall decided that Sir Michael had received sudden intelligence through Mr. Robert — they were wise enough to connect the young man with the catastrophe, — either of the death of some near and dear relation — the elder servants decimated the Audley family in their endeavours to find a likely relation — or of some alarming fall in the funds; or of the failure of some speculation or bank in which the greater part of the baronet's money was invested. The general leaning was towards the failure of a bank; and every member of the assembly seemed to take a dismal and raven-like delight in the fancy; though such a supposition involved their own ruin in the general destruction of that liberal household.

Robert sat by the dreary hearth, which seemed dreary even now when the blaze of a great wood-fire roared in the wide chimney, and listened to the low wail of the March wind, moaning round the house and lifting the shivering ivy from the walls it sheltered. He was tired and worn out, for remember that he had been awakened from his sleep at two o'clock that morning by the hot breath of blazing timber and the sharp crackling of burning wood-work. But for his presence of mind and cool decision, Mr. Luke Marks would have died a dreadful death. He still bore the traces of the night's peril, for the dark hair had been singed upon one side of his forehead, and his left hand



was red and inflamed from the effect of the scorching atmosphere, out of which he had dragged the landlord of the Castle Inn. He was thoroughly exhausted with fatigue and excitement, and he fell into a heavy sleep in his easy-chair before the bright fire, from which he was only awakened by the entrance of Mr. Richards with the return message.

This return message was very brief.

"Dear Audley, always glad to oblige. Alwyn Mosgrave, M.D., 12, Saville Row. Safe."

This, with names and addresses, was all that it contained.

"I shall want another message taken to Brentwood to-morrow morning, Richards," said Mr. Audley, as he folded the telegram. "I should be glad if the man would ride over with it before breakfast. He shall have half-a-sovereign for his trouble."

Mr. Richards bowed.

"Thank you, sir — not necessary, sir; but as you please, of course, sir," he murmured. "At what hour might you wish the man to go?"

Mr. Audley might wish the man to go as early as he could; so it was decided that he should go at six.

"My room is ready I suppose, Richards?" said Robert.

"Yes, sir — your old room."

"Very good. I shall go to bed at once. Bring me a glass of brandy-and-water as hot as you can make it, and wait for the telegram."



The second message was only a very earnest request to Doctor Mosgrave to pay an immediate visit to Audley Court on a matter of serious moment.

Having written this message, Mr. Audley felt that he had done all that he could do. He drank his brandy-and-water. He had actual need of the diluted alcohol, for he had been chilled to the bone by his adventures during the fire. He slowly sipped the pale golden liquid and thought of Clara Talboys, of that earnest girl whose brother's memory was now avenged, whose brother's destroyer was humiliated in the dust. Had she heard of the fire at the Castle Inn! How could she have done otherwise than hear of it in such a place as Mount Stanning? But had she heard that *he* had been in danger, and that he had distinguished himself by the rescue of a drunken boor? I fear that, even sitting by that desolate hearth, and beneath the roof, whose noble owner was an exile from his own house, Robert Audley was weak enough to think of these things — weak enough to let his fancy wander away to the dismal fir-trees under the cold February sky, and the dark-brown eyes that were so like the eyes of his lost friend.

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## CHAPTER XI.

## Dr. Mosgrave's Advice.

My lady slept. Through that long winter night she slept soundly. Criminals have often so slept their last sleep upon earth; and have been found in the grey morning slumbering peacefully by the gaoler who came to wake them.

The game had been played and lost. I do not think that my lady had thrown away a card, or missed the making of a trick which she might by any possibility have made: but her opponent's hand had been too powerful for her, and he had won.

She was more at peace now than she had ever been since that day — so soon after her second marriage — on which she had seen the announcement of the return of George Talboys from the gold-fields of Australia. She might rest now, for they now knew the worst of her. There were no new discoveries to be made. She had flung the horrible burden of an almost unendurable secret off her shoulders, and her selfish sensuous nature resumed its mastery of her. She slept, peacefully nestled in her downy bed, under the soft mountain of silken coverlet, and in the sombre shade of the green velvet curtains. She had ordered her maid to sleep on a low couch in the same room, and she had also ordered that a lamp should be kept burning all night.



Not that I think she had any fear of shadowy visitations in the still hours of the night. She was too thoroughly selfish to care very much for anything that could not hurt her; and she had never heard of a ghost doing any actual and palpable harm. She had feared Robert Audley, but she feared him no longer. He had done his worst; she knew that he could do no more without bringing everlasting disgrace upon the name he venerated.

"They'll put me away somewhere, I suppose," my lady thought, "that is the worst they can do for me."

She looked upon herself as a species of state prisoner, who would have to be taken good care of. A second Iron Mask who must be provided for in some comfortable place of confinement. She abandoned herself to a dull indifference. She had lived a hundred lives within the space of the last few days of her existence, and she had worn out her capacity for suffering; for a time at least.

She took a cup of strong green tea, and a few delicate fragments of toast the next morning with the same air of quiet relish common to condemned creatures who eat their last meal, while the gaolers look on to see that they do not bite fragments off the crockery, or swallow the tea-spoon, or do any other violent act tending to the evasion of Mr. Jack Ketch. She ate her breakfast, and took her morning bath, and emerged, with perfumed hair, and in the most exquisitely careless of morning toilets, from her luxurious



dressing-room. She looked round at all the costly appointments of the room with a yearning lingering gaze before she turned to leave it; but there was not one tender recollection in her mind of the man who had caused the furnishing of the chamber, and who in every precious toy that was scattered about in the reckless profusion of magnificence, had laid before her a mute evidence of his love. My lady was thinking how much the things had cost, and how painfully probable it was that the luxurious apartment would soon pass out of her possession.

She looked at herself in the cheval-glass before she left the room. A long night's rest had brought back the delicate rose-tints of her complexion, and the natural lustre of her blue eyes. That unnatural light which had burned so fearfully the day before had gone, and my lady smiled triumphantly as she contemplated the reflection of her beauty. The days were gone in which her enemies could have branded her with white-hot irons, and burned away the loveliness which had done such mischief. Whatever they did to her, they must leave her her beauty, she thought. At the worst they were powerless to rob her of that.

The March day was bright and sunny, with a cheerless sunshine certainly. My lady wrapped herself in an Indian shawl; a shawl that had cost Sir Michael a hundred guineas. I think she had an idea that it would be well to wear this costly garment; so that if hustled suddenly away, she might carry at least one of her possessions with her. Remember how much



she had perilled for a fine house and gorgeous furniture, for carriages and horses, jewels and laces; and do not wonder if she clung with a desperate tenacity to gauds and gew-gaws in the hour of her despair. If she had been Judas she would have held to her thirty pieces of silver to the last moment of her shameful life.

Mr. Robert Audley breakfasted in the library. He sat long over his solitary cup of tea, smoking his meerschauum pipe, and meditating darkly upon the task that lay before him.

"I will appeal to the experience of this Dr. Mosgrave," he thought, "physicians and lawyers are the confessors of this prosaic nineteenth century. Surely he will be able to help me."

The first fast train from London arrived at Audley at half-past ten o'clock, and at five minutes before eleven, Richards, the grave servant, announced Dr. Alwyn Mosgrave.

The physician from Saville Row was a tall man, of about fifty years of age. He was thin and sallow, with lantern jaws, and eyes of a pale feeble grey, that seemed as if they had once been blue, and had faded by the progress of time to their present neutral shade. However powerful the science of medicine as wielded by Dr. Alwyn Mosgrave, it had not been strong enough to put flesh upon his bones, or brightness into his face. He had a strangely expressionless, and yet strangely attentive countenance. He had the face of a man who had spent the greater part of his life in listening to



other people, and who had parted with his own individuality, and his own passions at the very outset of his career.

He bowed to Robert Audley, took the opposite seat indicated by him, and addressed his attentive face to the young barrister. Rober saw that the physician's glance for a moment lost its quiet look of attention, and became earnest and searching.

"He is wondering whether I am the patient," thought Mr. Audley, "and is looking for the diagnoses of madness in my face."

Dr. Mosgrave spoke as if in answer to this thought.

"It is not about your own — health — that you wish to consult me?" he said interrogatively.

"Oh, no!"

Dr. Mosgrave looked at his watch, a fifty guinea Benson-made chronometer, which he carried loose in his waistcoat pocket as carelessly as if it had been a potato.

"I need not remind you that my time is precious," he said, "your telegram informed me that my services were required in a case of — danger — as I apprehend, or I should not be here this morning."

Robert Audley had sat looking gloomily at the fire, wondering how he should begin the conversation, and had needed this reminder of the physician's presence.

"You are very good, Dr. Mosgrave," he said, rousing himself by an effort, "and I thank you very



much for having responded to my summons. I am about to appeal to you upon a subject which is more painful to me than words can describe. I am about to implore your advice in a most difficult case, and I trust, almost blindly, to your experience to rescue me, and others who are very dear to me, from a cruel and complicated position."

The business-like attention in Dr. Mosgrave's face grew into a look of interest as he listened to Robert Audley.

"The revelation made by the patient to the physician is I believe as sacred as the confession of a penitent to his priest?" Robert asked gravely.

"Quite as sacred."

"A solemn confidence, to be violated under no circumstances?"

"Most certainly."

Robert Audley looked at the fire again. How much should he tell, or how little, of the dark history of his uncle's second wife.

"I have been given to understand, Dr. Mosgrave, that you have devoted much of your attention to the treatment of insanity."

"Yes, my practice is almost confined to the treatment of mental diseases."

"Such being the case, I think I may venture to conclude that you sometimes receive strange, and even terrible revelations."

Dr. Mosgrave bowed.

He looked like a man who could have carried,



safely locked in his passionless breast, the secrets of a nation, and who would have suffered no inconvenience from the weight of such a burden.

"The story which I am about to tell you is not my own story," said Robert, after a pause, "you will forgive me therefore if I once more remind you that I can only reveal it upon the understanding that under no circumstances, or upon no apparent justification, is that confidence to be betrayed."

Dr. Mosgrave bowed again. A little sternly perhaps this time.

"I am all attention, Mr. Audley," he said, coldly.

Robert Audley drew his chair nearer to that of the physician, and in a low voice began the story which my lady had told upon her knees in the same chamber upon the previous night. Dr. Mosgrave's listening face, turned always towards the speaker, betrayed no surprise at that strange revelation. He smiled once, a grave quiet smile, when Mr. Audley came to that part of the story which told of the conspiracy at Ventnor, but he was not surprised. Robert Audley ended his story at the point at which Sir Michael Audley had interrupted my lady's confession. He told nothing of the disappearance of George Talboys, nor of the horrible suspicions that had grown out of that disappearance. He told nothing of the fire at the Castle Inn.

Dr. Mosgrave shook his head gravely when Mr. Audley came to the end of his story.

"You have nothing further to tell me?" he said.



"No I do not think there is anything more that need be told," Robert answered, rather evasively.

"You would wish to prove that this lady is mad, and therefore irresponsible for her actions, Mr. Audley?" said the physician.

Robert Audley stared wondering at the mad doctor. By what process had he so rapidly arrived at the young man's secret desire.

"Yes, I would rather, if possible, think her mad. I should be glad to find that excuse for her."

"And to save the *esclandre* of a Chancery suit, I suppose, Mr. Audley," said Dr. Mosgrave.

Robert shuddered, as he bowed an assent to this remark. It was something worse than a Chancery suit that he dreaded, with a horrible fear. It was a trial for murder that so long had haunted his dreams. How often he had awoke in an agony of shame from a vision of a crowded court-house, and his uncle's wife, in a criminal dock, hemmed in on every side by a sea of eager faces.

"I fear that I shall not be of any use to you," the physician said quietly, "I will see the lady if you please, but I do not believe that she is mad."

"Why not?"

"Because there is no evidence of madness in anything that she has done. She ran away from her home, because her home was not a pleasant one, and she left it in the hope of finding a better. There is no madness in that. She committed the crime of bigamy, because by that crime she obtained fortune



and position. There is no madness there. When she found herself in a desperate position, she did not grow desperate. She employed intelligent means, and she carried out a conspiracy which required coolness and deliberation in its execution. There is no madness in that."

"But the taints of hereditary insanity —"

"May descend to the third generation and appear in the lady's children, if she have any. Madness is not necessarily transmitted from mother to daughter. I should be glad to help you, if I could, Mr. Audley, but I do not think there is any proof of insanity in the story you have told me. I do not think any jury in England would accept the plea of insanity in such a case as this. The best thing that you can do with this lady is to send her back to her first husband; if he will have her."

Robert started at this sudden mention of his friend. "Her first husband is dead —" he answered, "at least he has been missing for some time — and I have reason to believe that he is dead."

Dr. Mosgrave saw the startled movement, and heard the embarrassment in Robert Audley's voice as he spoke of George Talboys.

"The lady's first husband is missing," he said, with a strange emphasis on the word — "you think that he is dead."

He paused for a few moments and looked at the fire, as Robert had looked before.

"Mr. Audley," he said presently, "there must be



no half-confidences between us. You have not told me all."

Robert, looking up suddenly, plainly expressed in his face the surprise he felt at these words.

"I should be very poorly able to meet the contingencies of my professional experience," said Dr. Mosgrave, "if I could not perceive where confidence ends and reservation begins. You have only told me half this lady's story, Mr. Audley. You must tell me more before I can offer you any advice. What has become of the first husband?"

He asked this question in a decisive tone. As if he knew it to be the key-stone of an arch.

"I have already told you, Dr. Mosgrave, that I do not know."

"Yes," answered the physician, "but your face has told me what you would have withheld from me; it has told me that you *suspect!*"

Robert Audley was silent.

"If I am to be of use to you, you must trust me, Mr. Audley," said the physician. "The first husband disappeared — how and when? I want to know the history of his disappearance."

Robert paused for some time before he replied to this speech; but by and by, he lifted his head, which had been bent in an attitude of earnest thought, and addressed the physician.

"I will trust you, Dr. Mosgrave," he said, "I will confide entirely in your honour and goodness. I do not ask you to do any wrong to society; but I ask



you to save our stainless name from degradation and shame, if you can do so conscientiously."

He told the story of George's disappearance, and of his own doubts and fears, heaven knows how reluctantly.

Dr. Mosgrave listened as quietly as he had listened before. Robert concluded with an earnest appeal to the physician's best feelings. He implored him to spare the generous old man, whose fatal confidence in a wicked woman had brought such misery upon his declining years.

It was impossible to draw any conclusion either favourable or otherwise from Dr. Mosgrave's attentive face. He rose when Robert had finished speaking, and looked at his watch once more.

"I can only spare you twenty minutes," he said, "I will see the lady if you please. You say her mother died in a mad-house."

"She did. Will you see Lady Audley alone?"

"Yes, alone if you please."

Robert rang for my lady's maid, and under convoy of that smart young damsel the physician found his way to the octagon ante-chamber, and the fairy boudoir with which it communicated.

Ten minutes afterwards he returned to the library in which Robert sat waiting for him.

"I have talked to the lady," he said quietly, "and we understand each other very well. There is latent insanity! Insanity which might never appear; or which might appear only once or twice in a life-time. It



would be *dementia* in its worst phase perhaps: acute mania; but its duration would be very brief, and it would only arise under extreme mental pressure. The lady is not mad; but she has the hereditary taint in her blood. She has the cunning of madness, with the prudence of intelligence. I will tell you what she is, Mr. Audley. She is dangerous!"

Dr. Mosgrave walked up and down the room once or twice before he spoke again.

"I will not discuss the probabilities of the suspicion that distresses you, Mr. Audley," he said presently, "but I will tell you this much. I do not advise any *esclandre*. This Mr. George Talboys has disappeared, but you have no evidence of his death. If you could produce evidence of his death, you could produce no evidence against this lady, beyond the one fact that she had a powerful motive for getting rid of him. No jury in the United Kingdom would condemn her upon such evidence as that."

Robert Audley interrupted Doctor Mosgrave hastily.

"I assure you, my dear Sir, he said, "that my greatest fear is the necessity of any exposure — any disgrace."

"Certainly, Mr. Audley," answered the physician coolly, "but you cannot expect me to assist you to condone one of the worst offences against society. If I saw adequate reason for believing that a murder had been committed by this woman, I should refuse to assist you in smuggling her away out of the reach of justice, although the honour of a hundred noble families



might be saved by my doing so. But I do not see adequate reason for your suspicions; and I will do my best to help you."

Robert Audley grasped the physician's hands in both his own.

"I will thank you when I am better able to do so," he said, with emotion, "I will thank you in my uncle's name as well as in my own."

"I have only five minutes more, and I have a letter to write," said Dr. Mosgrave, smiling at the young man's energy.

He seated himself at a writing table in the window, dipped his pen in the ink and wrote rapidly for about seven minutes. He had filled three sides of a sheet of note paper when he threw down his pen and folded his letter.

He put this letter into an envelope and delivered it, unsealed, to Robert Audley.

The address which it bore was —

Monsieur Val,

Villebrumeuse,

Belgium.

Mr. Audley looked rather doubtfully from this address to the doctor, who was putting on his gloves as deliberately as if his life had never known a more solemn purpose than the proper adjustment of them.

"That letter," he said, in answer to Robert Audley's inquiring look, "is written to my friend Monsieur Val,



the proprietor and medical superintendent of a very excellent *maison de santé* in the town of Villebrumeuse. We have known each other for many years, and he will no doubt willingly receive Lady Audley into his establishment, and charge himself with the full responsibility of her future life; it will not be a very eventful one!"

Robert Audley would have spoken, he would have once more expressed his gratitude for the help which had been given to him, but Dr. Mosgrave checked him with an authoritative gesture.

"From the moment in which Lady Audley enters that house," he said, "her life, so far as life is made up of action and variety, will be finished. Whatever secrets she may have will be secrets of ever! Whatever crimes she may have committed she will be able to commit no more. If you were to dig a grave for her in the nearest churchyard and bury her alive in it, you could not more safely shut her from the world and all worldly associations. But as a physiologist and as an honest man I believe you could do no better service to society than by doing this; for physiology is a lie if the woman I saw ten minutes ago is a woman to be trusted at large. If she could have sprung at my throat and strangled me with her little hands, as I sat talking to her just now, she would have done it."

"She suspected your purpose, then!"

"She knew it. 'You think I am mad like my



mother, and you have come to question me,' she said. 'You are watching for some sign of the dreadful taint in my blood.' Good day to you, Mr. Audley," the physician added hurriedly, "my time was up ten minutes ago, it is as much as I shall do to catch the train."



## CHAPTER XII.

## Buried Alive.

ROBERT AUDLEY sat alone in the library with the physician's letter upon the table before him, thinking of the work which was still to be done.

The young barrister had constituted himself the denouncer of this wretched woman. He had been her judge; and he was now her gaoler. Not until he had delivered the letter which lay before him to its proper address, not until he had given up his charge into the safe keeping of the foreign mad-house doctor, not until then would the dreadful burden be removed from him and his duty done.

He wrote a few lines to my lady, telling her that he was going to carry her away from Audley Court to a place from which she was not likely to return, and requesting her to lose no time in preparing for the journey. He wished to start that evening, if possible, he told her.

Miss Susan Martin, the lady's-maid, thought it a very hard thing to have to pack her mistress's trunks in such a hurry, but my lady assisted in the task. It seemed a pleasant excitement to her, this folding and refolding of silks and velvets, this gathering together of jewels and millinery. They were not going to rob her of her possessions, she thought. They were going to



send her away to some place of exile; but even exile was not hopeless, for there was scarcely any spot upon this wide earth in which her beauty would not constitute a little royalty, and win her liege knights and willing subjects. She toiled resolutely in directing and assisting her servant, who scented bankruptcy and ruin in all this packing up and hurrying away, and was therefore rather languid and indifferent in the discharge of her duties; and at six o'clock in the evening she sent her attendant to tell Mr. Audley that she was ready to depart as soon as he pleased.

Robert had consulted a volume of *Bradshaw*, and had discovered that Villebrumeuse lay out of the track of all railway traffic, and was only approachable by diligence from Brussels. The mail for Dover left London Bridge at nine o'clock, and could be easily caught by Robert and his charge, as the seven o'clock up-train from Audley reached Shoreditch at a quarter past eight. Travelling by the Dover and Calais route, they would reach Villebrumeuse by the following afternoon or evening.

What need have we to follow them upon that dismal night journey? My lady lay on one of the narrow cabin couches, comfortably wrapped in her furs; she had not forgotten her favourite Russian sables even in this last hour of shame and misery. Her mercenary soul hankered greedily after the costly and beautiful things of which she had been mistress. She had hidden away fragile tea-cups and covered vases of Sèvres and Dresden among the folds of her silken dinner dresses.



She had secreted jewelled and golden drinking cups amongst her delicate linen. She would have taken the pictures from the walls, and the Gobelin tapestry from the chairs, had it been possible for her to do so. She had taken all she could, and she accompanied Mr. Audley with a sulky submission, that was the despondent obedience of despair.

Robert Audley paced the deck of the steamer as the Dover clocks were striking twelve, and the town glimmered like a luminous crescent across the widening darkness of the sea. The vessel flew swiftly through the rolling waters towards the friendly Gallic shore, and Mr. Audley sighed a long sigh of relief as he remembered how soon his work would be done. He thought of the wretched creature lying forlorn and friendless in the cabin below. But when he pitied her most, and he could not but sometimes pity her for her womanhood and her helplessness, his friend's face came back upon him, bright and hopeful as he had seen it only on that first day of George's return from the Antipodes, and with that memory there returned his horror of the shameful lie that had broken the husband's heart.

"Can I ever forget it?" he thought; "can I ever forget his blank white face as he sat opposite to me at the coffee-house, with the *Times* newspaper in his hand? There are some crimes that can never be atoned for, and this is one of them. If I could bring George Talboys to life to-morrow, I could never heal that hor-



rible heart-wound; I could never make him the man he was before he read that printed lie."

It was late in the afternoon of the next day when the diligence bumped and rattled over the uneven paving of the principal street in Villebrumeuse. The old ecclesiastical town, always dull and dreary, seemed more than ordinarily dreary under the grey evening sky. The twinkling lamps, lighted early, and glimmering feebly, long distances apart, made the place seem darker rather than lighter, as glow-worms intensify the blackness of a hedge by their shining presence. The remote Belgian city was a forgotten, old world place, and bore the dreary evidence of decay upon every façade in the narrow streets, on every dilapidated roof, and feeble pile of chimneys. It was difficult to imagine for what reason the opposite rows of houses had been built so close together as to cause the lumbering diligence to brush the foot passengers off the wretched *trottoir*, unless they took good care to scrape the shop windows with their garments, for there was building room enough and to spare upon the broad expanse of flat country that lay behind the old city. Hypercritical travellers might have wondered why the narrowest and most uncomfortable streets were the busiest and most prosperous, while the nobler and broader thoroughfares were empty and deserted. But Robert Audley thought of none of these things. He sat in a corner of the mouldy carriage, watching my lady in the opposite corner, and wondering what the



face was like that was so carefully hidden beneath her veil.

They had had the *coupé* of the diligence to themselves for the whole of the journey, for there were not many travellers between Brussels and Villebrumeuse, and the public conveyance was supported by the force of tradition rather than by any great profit attaching to it as a speculation.

My lady had not spoken during the journey, except to decline some refreshments which Robert had offered her at a halting-place upon the road. Her heart sank when they left Brussels behind, for she had hoped that city might have been the end of her journey, and she had turned with a feeling of sickness and despair from the dull Belgian landscape.

She looked up at last as the vehicle jolted into a great stony quadrangle, which had been the approach to a monastery once, but which was now the courtyard of a dismal hotel, in whose cellars legions of rats skirmished and squeaked even while the broad sunshine was bright in the chambers above.

Lady Audley shuddered as she alighted from the diligence, and found herself in that dreary courtyard. Robert was surrounded by chattering porters, who clamoured for his "baggages," and disputed amongst themselves as to the hotel at which he was to rest. One of these men ran away to fetch a hackney-coach at Mr. Audley's behest, and reappeared presently, urging on a pair of horses — which were so small as to suggest the idea that they had been made out of one



ordinary-sized animal — with wild shrieks and whoops that had a demoniac sound in the darkness.

Mr. Audley left my lady in a dreary coffee-room in the care of a drowsy attendant while he drove away to some distant part of the quiet city. There was official business to be gone through before Sir Michael's wife could be quietly put away in the place suggested by Dr. Mosgrave. Robert had to see all manner of important personages; and to take numerous oaths; and to exhibit the English physician's letter; and to go through much ceremony of signing and countersigning, before he could take his lost friend's cruel wife to the home which was to be her last upon earth. Upwards of two hours elapsed before all this was arranged and the young man was free to return to the hotel, where he found his charge staring absently at a pair of wax candles, with a cup of untasted coffee standing cold and stagnant before her.

Robert handed my lady into the hired vehicle, and took his seat opposite to her once more.

"Where are you going to take me?" she asked, at last. "I am tired of being treated like some naughty child, who is put into a dark cellar as a punishment for its offences. Where are you taking me?"

"To a place in which you will have ample leisure to repent the past, Mrs. Talboys," Robert answered, gravely.

They had left the paved streets behind them, and had emerged out of a great gaunt square, in which there appeared to be about half a dozen cathedrals,



into a smooth boulevard, a broad lamp-lit road, on which the shadows of the leafless branches went and came tremblingly, like the shadows of paralytic skeletons. There were houses here and there upon this boulevard; stately houses, *entre cour et jardin*, and with plaster vases of geraniums on the stone pillars of the ponderous gateways. The rumbling hackney-carriage drove upwards of three-quarters of a mile along this smooth roadway before it drew up against a gateway, older and more ponderous than any of those they had passed.

My lady gave a little scream as she looked out of the coach window. The gaunt gateway was lighted by an enormous lamp; a great structure of iron and glass, in which one poor little shivering flame struggled with the March wind.

The coachman rang the bell, and a little wooden door at the side of the gate was opened by a grey-haired man, who looked out at the carriage, and then retired. He reappeared three minutes afterwards behind the folding iron gates which he unlocked and threw back to their full extent, revealing a dreary desert of stone-paved courtyard.

The coachman led his wretched horses into this courtyard, and piloted the vehicle to the principal doorway of the house, a great mansion of grey stone, with several long ranges of windows, many of which were dimly lighted, and looked out like the pale eyes of weary watchers upon the darkness of the night.

My lady, watchful and quiet as the cold stars in



the wintry sky, looked up at these casements with an earnest and scrutinising gaze. One of the windows was shrouded by a scanty curtain of faded red; and upon this curtain there went and came a dark shadow, the shadow of a woman with a fantastic head-dress, the shadow of a restless creature, who paced perpetually backwards and forwards before the window.

Sir Michael Audley's wicked wife laid her hand suddenly upon Robert's arm, and pointed with the other hand to this curtained window.

"I know where you have brought me," she said. "This is a MAD-HOUSE."

Mr. Audley did not answer her. He had been standing at the door of the coach when she addressed him, and he quietly assisted her to alight, and led her up a couple of shallow stone-steps, and into the entrance-hall of the mansion. He handed Doctor Mosgrave's letter to a neatly-dressed, cheerful-looking, middle-aged woman, who came tripping out of a little chamber which opened out of the hall, and was very much like the bureau of an hotel. This person smilingly welcomed Robert and his charge; and after dispatching a servant with the letter, invited them into her pleasant little apartment, which was gaily furnished with bright amber curtains and heated by a tiny stove.

"Madame finds herself very much fatigued," the Frenchwoman said, interrogatively, with a look of intense sympathy, as she placed an arm-chair for my lady.

"Madame" shrugged her shoulders wearily, and



looked round the little chamber with a sharp glance of scrutiny that betokened no very great favour.

"WHAT is this place, Robert Audley?" she cried fiercely. "Do you think I am a baby, that you may juggle with and deceive me — what is it? It is what I said just now, is it not?"

"It is a *maison de santé*, my lady," the young man answered gravely. "I have no wish to juggle with or to deceive you."

My lady paused for a few moments, looking reflectively at Robert.

"A *maison de santé*," she repeated. "Yes, they manage these things better in France. In England we should call it a mad-house. This is a house for mad people, this, is it not, Madame?" she said, in French, turning upon the woman, and tapping the polished floor with her foot.

"Ah, but no, Madame," the woman answered, with a shrill scream of protest. "It is an establishment of the most agreeable, where one amuses oneself—"

She was interrupted by the entrance of the principal of this agreeable establishment, who came beaming into the room with a radiant smile illuminating his countenance, and with Dr. Mosgrave's letter open in his hand.

It was impossible for him to say *how* enchanted he was to make the acquaintance of M'sieu. There was nothing upon earth which he was not ready to do for M'sieu in his own person, and nothing under heaven which he would not strive to accomplish for him, as



the friend of his acquaintance, so very much distinguished, the English doctor. Dr. Mosgrave's letter had given him a brief synopsis of the case, he informed Robert, in an undertone, and he was quite prepared to undertake the care of the charming and very interesting Madame — Madame —

He rubbed his hands politely, and looked at Robert. Mr. Audley remembered, for the first time, that he had been recommended to introduce his wretched charge under a feigned name.

He affected not to hear the proprietor's question. It might seem a very easy matter to have hit upon a heap of names, any one of which would have answered his purpose; but Mr. Audley appeared suddenly to have forgotten that he had ever heard any mortal appellation except that of himself and his lost friend.

Perhaps the proprietor perceived and understood his embarrassment. He at any rate relieved it by turning to the woman who had received them, and muttering something about No. 14, Bis. The woman took a key from a long range of others that hung over the mantelpiece, and a wax candle from a bracket in a corner of the room, and having lighted the candle, led the way across the stone-paved hall, and up a broad slippery staircase of polished wood.

The English physician had informed his Belgian colleague that money would be of minor consequence in any arrangements made for the comfort of the English lady who was to be committed to his care. Acting upon this hint, Monsieur Val opened the outer door of



a stately suite of apartments, which included a lobby, paved with alternate diamonds of black and white marble, but of a dismal and cellarlike darkness; a saloon furnished with gloomy velvet draperies, and with a certain funeral splendour which is not peculiarly conducive to the elevation of the spirits; and a bed-chamber, containing a bed so wondrously made, as to appear to have no opening whatever in its coverings, unless the counterpane had been split asunder with a penknife.

My lady stared dismally round at the range of rooms, which looked dreary enough in the wan light of a single wax candle. This solitary flame, pale and ghostlike in itself, was multiplied by paler phantoms of its ghostliness, which glimmered everywhere about the rooms; in the shadowy depths of the polished floors and wainscot, or the window panes, in the looking-glasses, or in those great expanses of glimmering something which adorned the rooms, and which my lady mistook for costly mirrors, but which were in reality wretched mockeries of burnished tin.

Amid all the faded splendour of shabby velvet, and tarnished gilding, and polished wood, the woman dropped into an arm-chair, and covered her face with her hands. The whiteness of them, and the starry light of diamonds trembling about them glittered in the dimly-lighted chamber. She sat silent, motionless, despairing, sullen, and angry, while Robert and the French doctor retired into an outer chamber, and talked together in undertones. Mr. Audley had very



little to say that had not been already said for him, with a far better grace than he himself could have expressed it, by the English physician. He had, after great trouble of mind, hit upon the name of Taylor, as a safe and simple substitute for that other name to which alone my lady had a right. He told the Frenchman that this Mrs. Taylor was distantly related to him — that she had inherited the seeds of madness from her mother, as indeed Dr. Mosgrave had informed Monsieur Val, and that she had shown some fearful tokens of the lurking taint that was latent in her mind; but that she was not to be called “mad.” He begged that she might be treated with all tenderness and compassion; that she might receive all reasonable indulgences; but he impressed upon Monsieur Val, that under no circumstances was she to be permitted to leave the house and grounds without the protection of some reliable person, who should be answerable for her safe keeping. He had only one other point to urge, and that was that Monsieur Val, who, as he had understood, was himself a Protestant — the doctor bowed — would make arrangements with some kind and benevolent Protestant clergyman, through whom spiritual advice and consolation might be secured for the invalid lady; who had especial need, Robert added, gravely, of such advantages.

This — with all necessary arrangements as to pecuniary matters, which were to be settled from time to time between Mr. Audley and the doctor, unassisted by any agents whatever — was the extent of the con-



versation between the two men, and occupied about a quarter of an hour. My lady sat in the same attitude when they re-entered the bedchamber in which they had left her, with her ringed hands still clasped over her face.

Robert bent over her to whisper in her ear.

"Your name is Madame Taylor here," he said. "I do not think you would wish to be known by your real name."

She only shook her head in answer to him, and did not even remove her hands from over her face.

"Madame will have an attendant entirely devoted to her service," said Monsieur Val. "Madame will have all her wishes obeyed; her *reasonable* wishes, but that goes without saying," Monsieur adds, with a quaint shrug. "Every effort will be made to render Madame's sojourn at Villebrumeuse agreeable, and as much profitable as agreeable. The inmates dine together when it is wished. I dine with the inmates, sometimes; my subordinate, a clever and a worthy man, always. I reside with my wife and children in a little pavilion in the grounds; my subordinate resides in the establishment. Madame may rely upon our utmost efforts being exerted to ensure her comfort."

Monsieur is saying a great deal more to the same effect, rubbing his hands and beaming radiantly upon Robert and his charge, when Madame rises suddenly, erect and furious, and dropping her jewelled fingers from before her face, tells him to hold his tongue.



"Leave me alone with the man who has brought me here," she cried between her set teeth. "Leave me!"

She points to the door with a sharp imperious gesture; so rapid that the silken drapery about her arm makes a swooping sound as she lifts her hand. The sibillant French syllables hiss through her teeth as she utters them, and seem better fitted to her mood and to herself than the familiar English she has spoken hitherto.

The French doctor shrugs his shoulders as he goes out into the dark lobby, and mutters something about a "beautiful devil," and a gesture worthy of "the Mars." My lady walked with a rapid footstep to the door between the bedchamber and the saloon; closed it, and with the handle of the door still in her hand, turned and looked at Robert Audley.

"You have brought me to my grave, Mr. Audley," she cried; "you have used your power basely and cruelly, and have brought me to a living grave."

"I have done that which I thought just to others and merciful to you," Robert answered, quietly; "I should have been a traitor to society had I suffered you to remain at liberty after — after the disappearance of George Talboys and the fire at the Castle Inn. I have brought you to a place in which you will be kindly treated by people who have no knowledge of your story — no power to taunt or to reproach you. You will lead a quiet and peaceful life, my lady, such a life as many a good and holy woman in this catholic country freely takes upon herself, and happily endures



unto the end. The solitude of your existence in this place will be no greater than that of a king's daughter, who, flying from the evil of the time, was glad to take shelter in a house as tranquil as this. Surely it is a small atonement which I ask you to render for your sins, a light penance which I call upon you to perform. Live here and repent; nobody will assail you, nobody will torment you. I only say to you, repent!"

"I *cannot!*" cried my lady, pushing her hair fiercely from her white forehead, and fixing her dilated eyes upon Robert Audley, "I *cannot!* Has my beauty brought me to *this*? Have I plotted and schemed to shield myself, and laid awake in the long deadly nights trembling to think of my dangers, for *this*? I had better have given up at once, since *this* was to be the end. I had better have yielded to the curse that was upon me, and given up when George Talboys first came back to England."

She plucked at the feathery golden curls as if she would have torn them from her head. It had served her so little after all, that gloriously glittering hair; that beautiful nimbus of yellow light that had contrasted so exquisitely with the melting azure of her eyes. She hated herself and her beauty.

"I would laugh at you and defy you if I dared," she cried; "I would kill myself and defy you if I dared. But I am a poor, pitiful coward, and have been so from the first. Afraid of my mother's horrible inheritance; afraid of poverty; afraid of George Talboys; afraid of *you*."



She was silent for a little while, but she still held her place by the door, as if determined to detain Robert as long as it was her pleasure to do so.

"Do you know what I am thinking of?" she said presently. "Do you know what I am thinking of, as I look at you in the dim light of this room? I am thinking of the day upon which George Talboys — disappeared."

Robert started as she mentioned the name of his lost friend; his face turned pale in the dusky light, and his breathing grew quicker and louder.

"He was standing opposite me as you are standing now," continued my lady. "You said that you would raze the old house to the ground; that you would root up every tree in the gardens to find your dead friend. You would have had no need to do so much; the body of George Talboys lies at the bottom of the old well, in the shrubbery beyond the lime-walk."

Robert Audley flung up his hands and clasped them above his head, with one loud cry of horror.

"Oh, my God!" he said, after a dreadful pause, "have all the ghastly things that I have thought prepared me so little for the ghastly truth, that it should come upon me like this at last?"

"He came to me in the lime-walk," resumed my lady, in the same hard, dogged tone as that in which she had confessed the wicked story of her life. "I knew that he would come, and I had prepared myself, as well as I could, to meet him. I was determined to bribe him, to cajole him, to defy him; to do anything



sooner than abandon the wealth and the position I had won, and go back to my old life. He came, and he reproached me for the conspiracy at Ventnor. He declared that so long as he lived he would never forgive me for the lie that had broken his heart. He told me that I had plucked his heart out of his breast and trampled upon it; and that he had now no heart in which to feel one sentiment of mercy for me. That he would have forgiven me any wrong upon earth, but that one deliberate and passionless wrong that I had done him. He said this and a great deal more, and he told me that no power on earth should turn him from his purpose, which was to take me to the man I had deceived, and make me tell my wicked story. He did not know the hidden taint that I had sucked in with my mother's milk. He did not know that it was possible to drive me mad. He goaded me as you have goaded me; he was as merciless as you have been merciless. We were in the shrubbery at the end of the lime-walk. I was seated upon the broken masonry at the mouth of the well. George Talboys was leaning upon the disused windlass, in which the rusty iron spindle rattled loosely whenever he shifted his position. I rose at last, and turned upon him to defy him, as I had determined to defy him at the worst. I told him that if he denounced me to Sir Michael, I would declare him to be a madman or a liar, and I defied him to convince the man who loved me — blindly as I told him — that he had any claim to me. I was going to leave him after having



told him this, when he caught me by the wrist and detained me by force. You saw the bruises that his fingers made upon my wrist and noticed them, and did not believe the account I gave of them. I could see that, Mr. Robert Audley, and I saw that you were a person I should have to fear."

She paused, as if she had expected Robert to speak; but he stood silent and motionless waiting for the end.

"George Talboys treated me as you treated me," she said presently. "He swore that if there was but one witness of my identity, and that witness was removed from Audley Court by the width of the whole earth, he would bring him there to swear to my identity, and to denounce me. It was then that I was mad. It was then that I drew the loose iron spindle from the shrunken wood, and saw my first husband sink with one horrible cry into the black mouth of the well. There is a legend of its enormous depth. I do not know how deep it is. It is dry, I suppose; for I heard no splash; only a dull thud. I looked down and I saw nothing but black emptiness. I knelt down and listened, but the cry was not repeated, though I waited for nearly a quarter of an hour — God knows how long it seemed to me — by the mouth of the well."

Robert Audley uttered no word of horror when the story was finished. He moved a little nearer towards the door against which Helen Talboys stood. Had there been any other means of exit from the



room, he would gladly have availed himself of it. He shrank from even a momentary contact with this creature.

"Let me pass you, if you please," he said, in an icy voice.

"You see I do not fear to make my confession to you," said Helen Talboys, "for two reasons. The first is that you dare not use it against me, because you know it would kill your uncle to see me in a criminal dock; the second is, that the law could pronounce no worse sentence than this, a life-long imprisonment in a mad-house. You see I do not thank you for your mercy, Mr. Robert Audley, for I know exactly what it is worth."

She moved away from the door, and Robert passed her, without a word, without a look.

Half an hour afterwards he was in one of the principal hotels at Villebrumeuse, sitting at a neatly-ordered supper-table, with no power to eat; with no power to distract his mind, even for a moment, from the image of that lost friend who had been treacherously murdered in the thicket at Audley Court.

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## CHAPTER XIII.

## Ghost-Haunted.

No feverish sleeper travelling in a strange dream ever looked out more wonderingly upon a world that seemed unreal than Robert Audley, as he stared absently at the flat swamps and dismal poplars between Villebrumeuse and Brussels. Could it be that he was returning to his uncle's house without the woman who had reigned in it for nearly two years as queen and mistress? He felt as if he had carried off my lady, and had made away with her secretly and darkly, and must now render up an account to Sir Michael of the fate of that woman, whom the baronet had so dearly loved.

"What shall I tell him," he thought; "shall I tell the truth — the horrible ghastly truth? No; that would be too cruel. His generous spirit would sink under the hideous revelation. Yet, in his ignorance of the extent of this wretched woman's wickedness, he may think perhaps that I have been hard with her."

Brooding thus, Mr. Robert Audley absently watched the cheerless landscape from his seat in the shabby *coupé* of the diligence, and thought how great a leaf had been torn out of his life, now that the dark story of George Talboys was finished.

What had he to do next? A crowd of horrible



thoughts rushed into his mind as he remembered the story that he had heard from the white lips of Helen Talboys. His friend — his murdered friend — lay hidden amongst the mouldering ruins of the old well at Audley Court. He had lain there for six long months, unburied, unknown; hidden in the darkness of the old convent well. What was to be done?

To institute a search for the remains of the murdered man was to inevitably bring about a coroner's inquest. Should such an inquest be held, it was next to impossible that the history of my lady's crime could fail to be brought to light. To prove that George Talboys met with his death at Audley Court was to prove almost as surely that my lady had been the instrument of that mysterious death; for the young man had been known to follow her into the lime-walk upon the day of his disappearance.

"My God!" Robert exclaimed, as the full horror of this position became evident to him, "is my friend to rest in his unhallowed burial-place because I have condoned the offences of the woman who murdered him?"

He felt that there was no way out of this difficulty. Sometimes he thought that it little mattered to his dead friend whether he lay entombed beneath a marble monument, whose workmanship should be the wonder of the universe, or in that obscure hiding-place in the thicket at Audley Court. At another time he would be seized with a sudden horror at the wrong that had been done to the murdered man, and would fain have



travelled even more rapidly than the express between Brussels and Paris could carry him, in his eagerness to reach the end of his journey, that he might set right this cruel wrong.

He was in London at dusk on the second day after that on which he had left Audley Court, and he drove straight to the Clarendon, to inquire after his uncle. He had no intention of seeing Sir Michael, as he had not yet determined how much or how little he should tell him, but he was very anxious to ascertain how the old man had sustained the cruel shock he had so lately endured.

"I will see Alicia," he thought; "she will tell me all about her father. It is only two days since he left Audley. I can scarcely expect to hear of any favourable change."

But Mr. Audley was not destined to see his cousin that evening, for the servants at the Clarendon told him that Sir Michael and his daughter had left by the morning mail for Paris, on their way to Vienna.

Robert was very well pleased to receive this intelligence; it afforded him a welcome respite, for it would be decidedly better to tell the baronet nothing of his guilty wife until he returned to England, with his health unimpaired, and his spirits re-established, it was to be hoped.

Mr. Audley drove to the Temple. The chambers which had seemed dreary to him ever since the disappearance of George Talboys were doubly so to-night. For that which had been only a dark suspicion had



now become a horrible certainty. There was no longer room for the palest ray, the most transitory glimmer of hope. His worst terrors had been too well founded.

George Talboys had been cruelly and treacherously murdered by the wife he had loved and mourned.

There were three letters waiting for Mr. Audley at his chambers. One was from Sir Michael, and another from Alicia. The third was addressed in a hand the young barrister knew only too well, though he had seen it but once before. His face flushed redly at the sight of the superscription, and he took the letter in his hand, carefully and tenderly, as if it had been a living thing, and sentient to his touch. He turned it over and over in his hands, looking at the crest upon the envelope, at the post-mark, at the colour of the paper, and then put it into the bosom of his waistcoat with a strange smile upon his face.

"What a wretched and unconscionable fool I am," he thought. "Have I laughed at the follies of weak men all my life, and am I to be more foolish than the weakest of them at last? The beautiful brown-eyed creature! Why did I ever see her? Why did my relentless Nemesis ever point the way to that dreary house in Dorsetshire?"

He opened the two first letters. He was foolish enough to keep the last for a delicious morsel — a fairy-like dessert after the commonplace substantialities of a dinner.

Alicia's letter told him that Sir Michael had borne his agony with such a persevering tranquillity that she



had become at last far more alarmed by his patient calmness than by any stormy manifestation of despair. In this difficulty she had secretly called upon the physician who attended the Audley household in any cases of serious illness, and had requested this gentleman to pay Sir Michael an apparently accidental visit. He had done so, and after stopping half an hour with the baronet, had told Alicia that there was no present danger of any serious consequence from this quiet grief, but that it was necessary that every effort should be made to arouse Sir Michael, and to force him, however unwillingly, into action.

Alicia had immediately acted upon this advice, had resumed her old empire as a spoiled child, and reminded her father of a promise he had made of taking her through Germany. With considerable difficulty she had induced him to consent to fulfilling this old promise, and having once gained her point, she had contrived that they should leave England as soon as it was possible to do so, and she told Robert, in conclusion, that she would not bring her father back to his old house until she had taught him to forget the sorrows associated with it.

The Baronet's letter was very brief. It contained half a dozen blank cheques on Sir Michael Audley's London bankers.

"You will require money, my dear Robert," he wrote, "for such arrangements as you may think fit to make for the future comfort of the person I committed to your care. I need scarcely tell you that those



arrangements cannot be too liberal. But perhaps it is as well that I should tell you now, for the first and only time, that it is my earnest wish never again to hear that person's name. I have no wish to be told the nature of the arrangements you may make for her. I am sure that you will act conscientiously and mercifully. I seek to know no more. Whenever you want money, you will draw upon me for any sums that you may require; but you will have no occasion to tell me for whose use you want that money."

Robert Audley breathed a long sigh of relief as he folded this letter. It released him from a duty which it would have been most painful for him to perform, and it for ever decided his course of action with regard to the murdered man.

George Talboys must lie at peace in his unknown grave, and Sir Michael Audley must never learn that the woman he had loved bore the red brand of murder on her soul.

Robert had only the third letter to open — the letter which he had placed in his bosom while he read the others; he tore open the envelope, handling it carefully and tenderly as he had done before.

The letter was as brief as Sir Michael's. It contained only these few lines: —

"Dear Mr. Audley, —

"The rector of this place has been twice to see Marks, the man you saved in the fire at the Castle Inn. He lies in a very precarious state at his mother's



cottage, near Audley Court, and is not expected to live many days. His wife is attending him, and both he and she have expressed a most earnest desire that you should see him before he dies. Pray come without delay.

“Yours very sincerely,

“CLARA TALBOYS.

“Mount Stanning Rectory, March 6.”

Robert Audley folded this letter very reverently, and replaced it underneath that part of his waistcoat which might be supposed to cover the region of his heart. Having done this, he seated himself in his favourite arm-chair, filled and lighted a pipe, and smoked it out, staring reflectively at the fire as long as his tobacco lasted. The lazy light that glimmered in his handsome grey eyes told of a dreamy reverie that could have scarcely been either gloomy or unpleasant. His thoughts wandered away upon the blue clouds of hazy tobacco smoke, and carried him into a bright region of unrealities, in which there was neither death nor trouble, grief nor shame; only himself and Clara Talboys in a world that was made all their own by the great omnipotence of their loves.

It was not till the last shred of pale Turkish tobacco had been consumed, and the grey ashes knocked out upon the topmost bar of the grate, that this pleasant dream floated off into the great storehouse in which the visions of things that never have been and never are to be, are kept locked and guarded by



some stern enchanter, who only turns the keys now and then and opens the door of his treasure-house a little way for the brief delight of mankind. But the dream fled, and the heavy burden of dismal realities fell again upon Robert's shoulders, more tenacious than any old man of the sea. "What can that man Marks want with me?" thought the barrister. "He is afraid to die until he has made a confession, perhaps. He wishes to tell me that which I know already, — the story of my lady's crime. I knew that he was in the secret. I was sure of it even upon the night on which I first saw him. He knew the secret, and he traded on it."

Robert Audley shrank strangely from returning to Essex. How should he meet Clara Talboys now that he knew the secret of her brother's fate. How many lies he should have to tell, or how much equivocation he must use in order to keep the truth from her. Yet would there be any mercy in telling her that horrible story, the knowledge of which must cast a blight upon her youth, and blot out every hope she had ever secretly cherished. He knew by his own experience how possible it was to hope against hope, and to hope unconsciously; and he could not bear that her heart should be crushed as his had been by the knowledge of the truth. "Better that she should hope vainly to the last," he thought; "better that she should go through life seeking the clue to her lost brother's fate, than that I should give that clue into her hands and say, 'Our worst fears are realised. The brother you



loved has been foully murdered in the early promise of his youth."

But Clara Talboys had written to him imploring him to return to Essex without delay. Could he refuse to do her bidding, however painful its accomplishment might be. And again, the man was dying, perhaps, and had implored to see him. Would it not be cruel to refuse to go, to delay an hour unnecessarily? He looked at his watch. It wanted only five minutes to nine. There was no train to Audley after the Ipswich mail, which left London at half-past eight; but there was a train that left Shoreditch at eleven, and stopped at Brentwood between twelve and one. Robert decided upon going by this train, and walking the distance between Brentwood and Audley, which was upwards of six miles.

He had a long time to wait before it would be necessary to leave the Temple on his way to Shoreditch, and he sat brooding darkly over the fire and wondering at the strange events which had filled his life within the last year and a half, coming like angry shadows between his lazy inclinations and himself, and investing him with purposes that were not his own.

"Good heavens!" he thought, as he smoked his second pipe, "how can I believe that it was I who used to lounge all day in this easy chair reading Paul de Kock, and smoking mild Turkish, who used to drop in at half-price to stand amongst the press men at the back of the boxes, and see a new burlesque, and finish the evening with the "Chough and Crow," and chops



and pale ale at Evans's. Was it I to whom life was such an easy merry-go-round? Was it I who was one of the boys who sit at ease upon the wooden horses, while other boys run barefoot in the mud, and work their hardest in the hope of a ride when their work is done? Heaven knows I have learnt the business of life since then; and now I must needs fall in love and swell the tragic chorus which is always being sung by the poor addition of my pitiful sighs and groans. Clara Talboys! Clara Talboys! Is there any merciful smile latent beneath the earnest light of your brown eyes. What would you say to me if I told you that I love you as earnestly and truly as I have mourned for your brother's fate — that the new strength and purpose of my life which has grown out of my friendship for the murdered man grows even stronger as it turns to you, and changes me until I wonder at myself. What would she say to me? Ah! Heaven knows. If she happened to like the colour of my hair, or the tone of my voice, she might listen to me, perhaps. But would she hear me any more because I love her truly and purely; because I would be constant, and honest, and faithful to her? Not she! These things might move her, perhaps, to be a little pitiful to me; but they would move her no more! If a girl with freckles and white eyelashes adored me, I should only think her a nuisance; but if Clara Talboys had a fancy to trample upon my uncouth person I should think she did me a favour. I hope poor little Alicia may pick up with some fair-haired Saxon in the course of her travels. I



hope —” His thoughts wandered away wearily, and lost themselves. How could he hope for anything, or think of anything, while the memory of his dead friend’s unburied body haunted him like a horrible spectre? He remembered a story — a morbid, hideous, yet delicious story, which had once pleasantly congealed his blood on a social winter’s evening — the story of a man, a monomaniac, perhaps, who had been haunted at every turn by the image of an unburied kinsman who *could* not rest in his unhallowed hiding-place. What if that dreadful story had its double in reality? What if he were henceforth to be haunted by the phantom of murdered George Talboys?

He pushed his hair away from his face with both his hands, and looked rather nervously around the snug little apartment. There were lurking shadows in the corners of the room that he scarcely liked. The door opening into his little dressing-room was ajar; he got up to shut it, and turned the key in the lock with a sharp click.

“I haven’t read Alexandre Dumas and Wilkie Collins for nothing,” he muttered. “I’m up to their tricks, sneaking in at doors behind a fellow’s back, and flattening their white faces against window panes, and making themselves all eyes in the twilight. It’s a strange thing that your generous-hearted fellow, who never did a shabby thing in his life, is capable of any meanness the moment he becomes a ghost. I’ll have the gas laid on to-morrow, and engage Mrs. Malony’s eldest son to sleep under the letter-box in the



lobby. The youth plays popular melodies upon a piece of tissue paper and a small-tooth comb, and will be quite pleasant company."

Mr. Audley walked wearily up and down the room, trying to get rid of the time. It was no use leaving the Temple until ten o'clock, and even then he would be sure to reach the station half an hour too early. He was tired of smoking. The soothing narcotic influence might be pleasant enough in itself, but the man must be of a singularly unsocial disposition who does not, after half a dozen lonely pipes, feel the need of some friendly companion, at whom he can stare dreamily athwart the pale grey mists, and who will stare kindly back at him in return. Do not think that Robert Audley was without friends, because he so often found himself alone in his quiet chambers. The solemn purpose which had taken so powerful a hold upon his careless life had separated him from old associations, and it was for this reason that he was alone. He had dropped away from his old friends. How could he sit amongst them, at social wine parties, perhaps, or at pleasant little dinners, that were washed down with Nonpareil and Chambertin, Pomard and Champagne? How could he sit amongst them, listening to their careless talk of politics and opera, literature and racing, theatres and science, scandal, and theology, and yet carry in his mind the horrible burden of those dark terrors and suspicions that were with him by day and night? He could not do it! He had shrunk from these men as if he had, indeed, been a detective police



officer, stained with vile associations, and unfit company for honest gentlemen. He had drawn himself away from all familiar haunts, and had shut himself in his lonely rooms with the perpetual trouble of his mind for his sole companion, until he had grown as nervous as habitual solitude will eventually make the strongest and the wisest man, however he may vaunt himself of his strength and wisdom.

The clock of the Temple Church and the clocks of St. Dunstan's, St. Clement's Danes, and a crowd of other churches, whose steeples uprear themselves above the house-tops by the river, struck ten at last, and Mr. Audley, who had put on his hat and overcoat nearly half an hour before, let himself out of the little lobby, and locked his door behind him. He mentally reiterated his determination to engage "Parthrick," as Mrs. Malony's eldest son was called by his devoted mother. The youth should enter upon his functions the very next night after, and if the ghost of hapless George Talboys should invade these gloomy apartments, the phantom must make its way across Patrick's body before it could reach the inner chamber in which the proprietor of the premises slept.

Do not laugh at poor Robert because he grew hypochondriacal, after hearing the horrible story of his friend's death. There is nothing so delicate, so fragile, as that invisible balance upon which the mind is always trembling. Mad to-day and sane to-morrow.

Who can forget that almost terrible picture of Dr. Samuel Johnson? The awful disputant of the club-



room, solemn, ponderous, severe, and merciless, the admiration and the terror of humble Bozzy, the stern monitor of gentle Oliver, the friend of Garrick and Reynolds to-night: and before sunset to-morrow a weak miserable old man, discovered by good Mr. and Mrs. Thrale, kneeling upon the floor of his lonely chamber, in an agony of childish terror and confusion, and praying to a merciful God for the preservation of his wits. I think the memory of that dreadful afternoon, and of the tender care he then received, should have taught the doctor to keep his hand steady at Streatham, when he took his bed-room candlestick, from which it was his habit to shower rivulets of molten wax upon the costly carpet of his beautiful protectress; and might have even had a more enduring effect, and taught him to be merciful, when the brewer's widow went mad in her turn, and married that dreadful creature, the Italian singer. Who has not been, or is not to be, mad in some lonely hour of life? Who is quite safe from the trembling of the balance?

Fleet Street was quiet and lonely at this late hour, and Robert Audley being in a ghost-seeing mood would have been scarcely astonished had he seen Johnson's set come roystering westward in the lamp-light, or blind John Milton groping his way down the steps before Saint Bride's church.

Mr. Audley hailed a Hansom at the corner of Farringdon Street, and was rattled rapidly away across tenantless Smithfield market, and into a labyrinth of



dingy streets that brought him out upon the broad grandeur of Finsbury Pavement.

"Nobody ever saw a ghost in a Hansom cab," Robert thought, "and even Dumas hasn't done *that* as yet. Not but that he's capable of doing it if the idea occurred to him. *Un revenant en fiacre*. Upon my word, the title doesn't sound bad. The story would be something about a dismal gentleman, in black, who took the vehicle by the hour, and was contumacious upon the subject of fares, and beguiled the driver into lonely neighbourhoods, beyond the barriers, and made himself otherwise unpleasant."

The Hansom rattled up the steep and stony approach to the Shoreditch station, and deposited Robert at the doors of that unlovely temple. There were very few people going to travel by this midnight train, and Robert walked up and down the long wooden platform, reading the huge advertisements whose gaunt lettering looked wan and ghastly in the dim lamp-light.

He had the carriage in which he sat all to himself. All to himself, did I say? Had he not lately summoned to his side that ghostly company which of all companionship is the most tenacious? The shadow of George Talboys pursued him, even in the comfortable first class carriage, and was behind him when he looked out of the window, and was yet far away ahead of him and the rushing engine, in that thicket towards which the train was speeding, by the side of the unhallowed



hiding place in which the mortal remains of the dead man lay, neglected and uncared for.

"I must give my lost friend decent burial," Robert thought, as a chill wind swept across the flat landscape, and struck him with such frozen breath as might have emanated from the lips of the dead. "I must do it; or I shall die of some panic like this which has seized upon me to-night. I must do it; at any peril; at any cost. Even at the price of that revelation which will bring the mad woman back from her safe hiding-place, and place her in a criminal dock." He was glad when the train stopped at Brentwood at a few minutes after twelve. Only one other person got out at the little station, — a burly grazier, who had been to one of the theatres to see a tragedy. Country people always go to see tragedies. None of your flimsy vaudevilles for them! None of your pretty drawing-room, moderator lamp and French window pieces, with a confiding husband, a frivolous wife, and a smart lady's maid, who is always accommodating enough to dust the furniture and announce visitors; no such gauzy productions; but a good monumental five act tragedy, in which their ancestors have seen Garrick and Mrs. Abington, and in which they themselves can remember the O'Neil, the beautiful creature whose lovely neck and shoulders became suffused with a crimson glow of shame and indignation, when the actress was Mrs. Beverley, and insulted by Stukeley in her poverty and sorrow. I think our modern O'Neils scarcely feel their stage wrongs so



keenly; or, perhaps, those brightly indignant blushes of to-day struggle ineffectually against the new art of Madame Rachel, and are lost to the public beneath the lily purity of priceless enamel.

Robert Audley looked hopelessly about him as he left the pleasant town of Brentwood, and descended the lonely hill into the valley which lay between the town he had left behind him and that other hill, upon which that frail and dismal tenement — the Castle Inn — had so long struggled with its enemy, the wind, only to succumb at last, and to be shrivelled and consumed away like a withered leaf, by the alliance of that old adversary with a newer and a fiercer foe.

"It's a dreary walk," Mr. Audley said, as he looked along the smooth high road that lay before him, lonely as the track across a desert. "It's a dreary walk for a dismal wretch to take between twelve and one, upon a cheerless March night, with not so much moonlight in all the black sky as might serve to convince one of the existence of such a luminary. But I'm very glad I came," thought the barrister, "if this poor creature is dying, and really wishes to see me. I should have been a wretch had I held back. Besides, *she* wishes it; she wishes it; and what can I do but obey her, Heaven help me!"

He stopped by the wooden fence which surrounded the gardens of Mount Stanning rectory, and looked across a laurel hedge towards the lattice windows of that simple habitation. There was no glimmer of light in any one of these windows, and Mr. Audley was fain



to go away, after having had no better satisfaction than such cold comfort as was to be obtained from a long lingering contemplation of the house that sheltered the one woman before whose invincible power the impregnable fortress of his heart had surrendered. Only a heap of blackened ruins stood upon the spot on which the Castle Inn had once done battle with the winds of Heaven. The cold night breezes had their way with the few fragments that the fire had left, and whirled them hither and thither as they would, scattering a shower of dust and cinders and crumbling morsels of charred wood upon Robert Audley as he passed.

It was half-past one o'clock when the night wanderer entered the village of Audley, and it was only there that he remembered that Clara Talboys had omitted to give him any direction by which he might find the cottage in which Luke Marks lay.

"It was Dawson who recommended that the poor creature should be taken to his mother's cottage," Robert thought, by-and-by, "and I dare say, Dawson has attended him ever since the fire. He'll be able to tell me the way to the cottage."

Acting upon this idea, Mr. Audley stopped at the house in which Helen Talboys had lived before her second marriage. The door of the little surgery was ajar, and there was a light burning within. Robert pushed the door open and peeped in. The surgeon was standing at the mahogany counter, mixing a draught in a glass measure, with his hat close beside



him. Late as it was, he had evidently only just come in. The harmonious snoring of his assistant sounded from a little room within the surgery.

"I am sorry to disturb you, Mr. Dawson," Robert said, apologetically, as the surgeon looked up and recognised him, "but I have come down to see Marks, who, I hear, is in a very bad way, and I want you to tell me the way to his mother's cottage."

"I'll show you the way, Mr. Audley," answered the surgeon, "I am going there this minute."

"The man is very bad then?"

"So bad that he can be no worse. The only change that can happen is that change which will take him beyond the reach of any earthly suffering."

"Strange!" exclaimed Robert. "He did not appear to be much burnt."

"He was not much burnt. Had he been, I should never have recommended his being removed from Mount Stanning. It is the shock that has done the business. His health had been long undermined by habits of intoxication, and has completely given way under the sudden terror of that night. He has been in a raging fever for the last two days; but to-night he is much calmer, and I'm afraid, before to-morrow night we shall have seen the last of him."

"He has asked to see me, I am told," said Mr. Audley.

"Yes," answered the surgeon, carelessly. "A sick man's fancy, no doubt. You dragged him out of the house, and did your best to save his life. I dare say,



rough and boorish as the poor fellow is, he thinks a good deal of that."

They had left the surgery, the door of which Mr. Dawson had locked behind him. There was money in the till, perhaps, for surely the village apothecary could not have feared that the most daring housebreaker would imperil his liberty in the pursuit of blue pill and colocynth, or salts and senna.

The surgeon led the way along the silent street, and presently turned into a lane at the end of which Robert Audley saw the wan glimmer of a light. A light which told of the watch that is kept by the sick and dying; a pale, melancholy light, which always has a dismal aspect when looked upon in this silent hour betwixt night and morning. It shone from the window of the cottage in which Luke Marks lay, watched by his wife and mother.

Mr. Dawson lifted the latch, and walked into the common room of the little tenement, followed by Robert Audley. It was empty, but a feeble tallow candle, with a broken back and a long, cauliflower-headed wick sputtered upon the table. The sick man lay in the room above.

"Shall I tell him you are here?" asked Mr. Dawson.

"Yes, yes, if you please. But be cautious how you tell him, if you think the news likely to agitate him. I am in no hurry. I can wait. You can call me when you think I can safely come up-stairs."

The surgeon nodded, and softly ascended the narrow



wooden stairs leading to the upper chamber. Mr. Dawson was a good man, and indeed a parish surgeon has need to be good, and tender, and kindly, and gentle, or the wretched patients who have no neatly folded fees of gold and silver to offer, may suffer petty slights and insignificant cruelties, not easily to be proved before a board of well-to-do poor-law guardians, but not the less bitter to bear in the fretful and feverish hours of sickness and pain.

Robert Audley seated himself in a Windsor chair, by the cold hearth-stone, and stared disconsolately about him. Small as the room was, the corners were dusky and shadowy in the dim light of the cauliflower-headed candle. The faded face of an eight-day clock, which stood opposite Robert Audley, seemed to stare him out of countenance. The awful sounds which can emanate from eight-day clocks after midnight are too generally known to need description. The young man listened in awe-stricken silence to the heavy, monotonous ticking, which sounded as if the clock had been counting out the seconds which yet remained for the dying man, and checking them off with gloomy satisfaction. "Another minute gone! another minute gone! another minute gone!" the clock seemed to say, until Mr. Audley felt inclined to throw his hat at it, in the wild hope of stopping that melancholy and monotonous noise.

But he was relieved at last by the low voice of the surgeon, who looked down from the top of the little



staircase to tell him that Luke Marks was awake and would be glad to see him.

Robert immediately obeyed this summons. He crept softly up the stairs and took off his hat before he bent his head to enter at the low doorway of the humble rustic chamber. He took off his hat in the presence of this common peasantman because he knew that there was another and a more awful presence hovering about the room, and eager to be admitted.

Phoebe Marks was sitting at the foot of the bed, with her eyes fixed upon her husband's face. Not with any very tender expression in their pale light, but with a sharp, terrified anxiety, which showed that it was the coming of death itself that she dreaded, rather than the loss of her husband. The old woman was busy at the fire-place, airing linen, and preparing some mess of broth which it was not likely the patient would ever eat. The sick man lay with his head propped up by pillows, his coarse face deadly pale, and his great hands wandering uneasily about the coverlet. Phoebe had been reading to him, for an open Testament lay amongst the medicine and lotion bottles upon the table near the bed. Every object in the room was neat and orderly, and bore witness of that delicate precision which had always been a distinguishing characteristic of Phoebe.

The young woman rose as Robert Audley crossed the threshold, and hurried towards him.

"Let me speak to you for a moment, sir, before



you talk to Luke," she said, in an eager whisper. "Pray let me speak to you first."

"What's the gal a sayin', there?" asked the invalid in a subdued roar, which died away hoarsely on his lips. He was feebly savage, even in his weakness. The dull glaze of death was gathering over his eyes, but they still watched Phœbe with a sharp glance of dissatisfaction. "What's she up to there?" he said. "I won't have no plottin' and no hatchin' agen me. I want to speak to Mr. Audley my own self; and whatever I done I'm a goin' to answer for. If I done any mischief, I'm a goin' to try and undo it. What's she a sayin'?"

"She ain't a sayin' nothin', lovey," answered the old woman, going to the bed-side of her son, who, even when made more interesting than usual by illness, did not seem a very fit subject for this tender appellation.

"She's only a tellin' the gentleman how bad you've been, my pretty."

"What I'm a goin' to tell I'm only a goin' to tell to him, remember," growled Mr. Marks; "and ketch me a tellin' of it to him if it warn't for what he done for me the other night."

"To be sure not, lovey," answered the old woman, soothingly.

Her intellect was rather limited in its scope, and she attached no more importance to her son's eager words now, than she had attached to the wild ravings of delirium. That horrible delirium in which Luke had



described himself as being dragged through miles of blazing brick and mortar: and flung down wells; and dragged out of deep pits by the hair of the head; and suspended in the air by giant hands that came out of the clouds to pluck him from off the solid earth and hurl him into chaos; with many other wild terrors and delusions which ran riot in his distempered brain.

Phœbe Marks had drawn Mr. Audley out of the room and on to the narrow landing at the top of the little staircase. This landing was a platform of about three feet square, and it was as much as the two could manage to stand upon it without pushing each other against the whitewashed wall, or backwards down the stairs.

"Oh, sir, I wanted to speak to you so badly," Phœbe whispered eagerly; "you know what I told you when I found you safe and well upon the night of the fire?"

"Yes, yes."

"I told you what I suspected; what I think still."

"Yes, I remember."

"But I never breathed a word of it to anybody but you, sir; and I think that Luke has forgotten all about that night; I think that what went before the fire has gone clean out of his head altogether. He was tipsy you know when my la — when she came to the Castle; and I think he was so dazed and scared like by the fire that it all went out of his memory. He doesn't suspect what I suspect at any rate, or he'd have spoken of it to anybody and everybody; but he's dreadful spite-



ful against my lady, for he says if she'd have let him have a place at Brentwood or Chelmsford, this wouldn't have happened. So what I wanted to beg of you, sir, is not to let a word drop before Luke."

"Yes, yes, I understand; I will be careful."

"My lady has left the Court, I hear, sir?"

"Yes."

"Never to come back, sir?"

"Never to come back."

"But she has not gone where she'll be cruelly treated: where she'll be ill-used?"

"No, she will be very kindly treated."

"I'm glad of that, sir; I beg your pardon for troubling you with the question, sir, but my lady was a kind mistress to me."

Luke's voice, husky and feeble, was heard within the little chamber at this period of the conversation, demanding angrily when "that gal would have done jawing," upon which Phœbe put her finger to her lips, and led Mr. Audley back into the sick room.

"I don't want *you*," said Mr. Marks, decisively, as his wife re-entered the chamber, "I don't want *you*, you've no call to hear what I've got to say; I only want Mr. Audley, and I wants to speak to him all alone, with none o' your sneakin' listenin' at doors, d'ye hear, so you may go down stairs and keep there till you're wanted; and you may take mother — no mother may stay, I shall want her presently."

The sick man's feeble hand pointed to the door, through which his wife departed very submissively.



"I've no wish to hear anything, Luke," she said, "but I hope you won't say anything against those that have been good and generous to you."

"I shall say what I like," answered Mr. Marks, fiercely, "and I'm not agoin' to be ordered by you. You ain't the parson, as I've ever heerd of; nor the lawyer neither."

The landlord of the Castle inn had undergone no moral transformation by his death-bed sufferings, fierce and rapid as they had been. Perhaps some faint glimmer of a light that had been far off from his life, now struggled feebly through the black obscurities of ignorance that darkened his soul. Perhaps a half angry, half sullen penitence urged him to make some rugged effort to atone for a life that had been selfish and drunken and wicked. Be it how it might, he wiped his white lips, and turning his haggard eyes earnestly upon Robert Audley, pointed to a chair by the bedside.

"You've made game of me in a general way, Mr. Audley," he said, presently, "and you've drawed me out, and you've tumbled and tossed me about like in a gentlemanly way, till I was nothink or anythink in your hands; and you've looked me through and through, and turned me inside out till you thought you knowed as much as I knowed. I'd no particular call to be grateful to you, not before the fire at the Castle t'other night. But I am grateful to you for that. I'm not grateful to folks in a general way, p'raps, because the things as gentlefolks have give me have a'most allus



been the very things I didn't want. They've give me soup, and tracks, and flannel, and coals; but, Lord, they've made such a precious noise about it that I'd have been glad to send 'em all back to 'em. But when a gentleman goes and puts his own life in danger to save a drunken brute like me, the drunkenest brute as ever was feels grateful like to that gentleman, and wishes to say before he dies — which he sees in the doctor's face as he ain't got long to live — 'Thank ye, sir, I'm obliged to you.' ”

Luke Marks stretched out his left hand — the right had been injured by the fire, and was wrapped in linen — and groped feebly for that of Mr. Robert Audley.

The young man took the coarse but shrunken hand in both his own, and pressed it cordially.

“I need no thanks, Luke Marks,” he said, “I was very glad to be of service of you.”

Mr. Marks did not speak immediately. He was lying quietly upon his side, staring reflectingly at Robert Audley.

“You was oncommon fond of that gent as disappeared at the Court, warn't you, sir,” he said at last.

Robert started at the mention of his dead friend.

“You was oncommon fond of this Mr. Talboys, I've heerd say, sir,” repeated Luke.

“Yes, yes,” answered Robert, rather impatiently, “he was my very dear friend.”

“I've heerd the servants at the Court say how you



took on when you couldn't find him. I've heerd the landlord of the Sun Inn say how cut up you was when you first missed him. 'If the two gents had been brothers,' the landlord said, 'our gent,' meanin' you, sir, 'couldn't have been more cut up when he missed the other.'"

"Yes, yes, I know, I know," said Robert; "pray do not speak any more of this subject; I cannot tell you how much it distresses me."

Was he to be haunted for ever by the ghost of his unburied friend? He came here to comfort this sick man, and even here he was pursued by that relentless shadow; even here he was reminded of the secret crime which had darkened his life.

"Listen to me, Marks," he said, earnestly; "believe me, that I appreciate your grateful words, and that I am very glad to have been of service to you. But before you say anything more, let me make one most solemn request. If you have sent for me that you may tell me anything of the fate of my lost friend, I entreat you to spare yourself and to spare me that horrible story. You can tell me nothing which I do not already know. The worst you can tell me of the woman who was once in your power, has already been revealed to me by her own lips. Pray then be silent upon this subject; I say again, you can tell me nothing which I do not know."

Luke Marks looked musingly at the earnest face of his visitor, and some shadowy expression which was



almost like a smile flitted feebly across the sick man's haggard features.

"I can't tell you nothin' you don't know?" he asked.

"Nothing."

"Then it ain't no good for me to try," said the invalid, thoughtfully. "Did *she* tell you?" he asked after a pause.

"I must beg, Marks, that you will drop the subject," Robert answered, almost sternly, "I have already told you that I do not wish to hear it spoken of. Whatever discoveries you made, you made your market out of them. Whatever guilty secrets you got possession of, you were paid for keeping silence. You had better keep silence to the end."

"Had I?" cried Luke Marks in an eager whisper. "Had I really now better hold my tongue to the last?"

"I think so, most decidedly. You traded on your secret, and you were paid to keep it. It would be more honest to hold to your bargain, and keep it still."

"Would it now?" said Mr. Marks with a ghastly grin; "but suppose my lady had one secret and I another. How then?"

"What do you mean?"

"Suppose I could have told something all along; and would have told it, perhaps, if I'd been a little better treated; if what was give to me had been give



a little more liberal like, and not flung at me as if I was a dog, and was only give it to be kep' from bitin'. Suppose I could have told somethin', and would have told it but for that? How then?"

It is impossible to describe the ghastliness of the triumphant grin that lighted up the sick man's haggard face.

"His mind is wandering," Robert thought, "I had need be patient with him, poor fellow. It would be strange if I could not be patient with a dying man."

Luke Marks lay staring at Mr. Audley for some moments with that triumphant grin upon his face. The old woman, wearied out with watching her dying son, had dropped into a doze, and sat nodding her sharp chin over the handful of fire, upon which the broth that was never to be eaten, still bubbled and simmered.

Mr. Audley waited very patiently until it should be the sick man's pleasure to speak. Every sound was painfully distinct in that dead hour of the night. The dropping of the ashes on the hearth, the ominous crackling of the burning coals, the slow and ponderous ticking of the sulky clock in the room below, the low moaning of the March wind (which might have been the voice of an English Banshee, screaming her dismal warning to the watchers of the dying), the hoarse breathing of the sick man — every sound held itself apart from all other sounds, and made itself into a



separate voice, loud with a gloomy portent in the solemn stillness of the house.

Robert sat with his face shaded by his hands, thinking what was to become of him now that the secret of his friend's fate had been told, and the dark story of George Talboys and his wicked wife had been finished in the Belgian mad-house. What was to become of him?

He had no claim upon Clara Talboys; for he had resolved to keep the horrible secret that had been told to him. How then could he dare to meet her with that secret held back from her? How could he ever look into her earnest eyes, and yet withhold the truth? He felt that all power of reservation would fail before the searching glance of those calm brown eyes. If he was indeed to keep this secret he must never see her again. To reveal it would be to embitter her life. Could he, for any selfish motive of his own, tell her this terrible story? — or could he think that if he told her she would suffer her murdered brother to lie unavenged and forgotten in his unhallowed grave?

Hemmed in on every side by difficulties which seemed utterly insurmountable; with the easy temperament which was natural to him embittered by the gloomy burden he had borne so long, Robert Audley looked hopelessly forward to the life which lay before him, and thought that it would have been better for him had he perished among the burning ruins of the Castle Inn.



"Who would have been sorry for me? No one but my poor little Alicia," he thought, "and hers would have only been an April sorrow. Would Clara Talboys have been sorry? No! She would have only regretted me as a lost link in the mystery of her brother's death. She would only —"



## CHAPTER XIV.

That which the Dying Man had to tell.

HEAVEN knows whither Mr. Audley's thoughts might have wandered had he not been startled by a sudden movement of the sick man, who raised himself up in his bed, and called to his mother.

The old woman woke up with a jerk, and turned sleepily enough to look at her son.

"What is it, Luke, deary?" she asked soothingly. "It ain't time for the doctor's stuff yet. Mr. Dawson said as you weren't to have it till two hours after he went away, and he ain't been gone an hour yet."

"Who said it was the doctor's stuff I wanted?" cried Mr. Marks, impatiently. "I want to ask you something, mother. Do you remember the seventh of last September?"

Robert started, and looked eagerly at the sick man. Why did he harp upon this forbidden subject? Why did he insist upon recalling the date of George's murder? The old woman shook her head in feeble confusion of mind.

"Lord, Luke," she said, "how can'ee ask me such questions? My memory's been a failin' me this eight or nine year; and I never was one to remember the days of the month, or aught o' that sort. How should a poor workin' woman remember such things."



Luke Marks shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

"You're a good un to do what's asked you, mother," he said, peevishly. "Didn't I tell you to remember that day? Didn't I tell you as the time might come when you'd be called upon to bear witness about it, and put upon your Bible oath about it? Didn't I tell you that, mother?"

The old woman shook her head hopelessly.

"If you say so, I make no doubt you did, Luke," she said, with a conciliatory smile; "but I can't call it to mind, lovey. My memory's been failin' me this nine year, sir," she added, turning to Robert Audley, "and I'm but a poor crittur."

Mr. Audley laid his hand upon the sick man's arm.

"Marks," he said, "I tell you again, you have no cause to worry yourself about this matter. I ask you no questions, I have no wish to hear anything."

"But suppose I want to tell somethin'," cried Luke, with feverish energy, "suppose I feel that I can't die with a secret on my mind, and have asked to see you on purpose that I might tell you; Suppose that, and you'll suppose nothing but the truth. I'd have been burnt alive before I'd have told *her*," he spoke these words between his set teeth, and scowled savagely as he uttered them. "I'd have been burnt alive first. I made her pay for her pretty insolent ways; I made her pay for her airs and graces; I'd never have told her — never, never! I had my power over her, and I kept it; I had my secret, and I was paid for it; and there



wasn't a petty slight as she ever put upon me or mine that I didn't pay her out for twenty times over!"

"Marks, Marks, for heaven's sake be calm," said Robert, earnestly; "what are you talking of? What is it that you could have told?"

"I'm agoin' to tell you," answered Luke, wiping his dry lips. "Give us a drink, mother."

The old woman poured out some cooling drink into a mug, and carried it to her son.

He drank it in an eager hurry, as if he felt that the brief remainder of his life must be a race with the pitiless pedestrian, Time.

"Stop where you are," he said to his mother, pointing to a chair at the foot of the bed.

The old woman obeyed, and seated herself meekly opposite to Mr. Audley. She took out her spectacle case, polished her spectacles, put them on and beamed placidly upon her son, as if she cherished some faint hope that her memory might be assisted by this process.

"I'll ask you another question, mother," said Luke, "and I think it'll be strange if you can't answer it. Do you remember when I was at work upon Atkinson's farm; before I was married, you know, and when I was livin' down here along of you?"

"Yes, yes," Mrs. Marks answered, nodding triumphantly, "I remember that, my dear. It were last fall, just about as the apples was bein' gathered in the orchard across our lane, and about the time as you



had your new sprigged wesket. I remember, Luke, I remember."

Mr. Audley wondered where all this was to lead to, and how long he would have to sit by the sick man's bed hearing a conversation that had no meaning to him.

"If you remember that much, maybe you'll remember more, mother," said Luke. "Can you call to mind my bringing some one home here one night, while Atkinsons was stackin' the last o' their corn?"

Once more Mr. Audley started violently, and this time he looked up earnestly at the face of the speaker, and listened, with a strange, breathless interest, that he scarcely understood himself, to what Luke Marks was saying.

"I rek'lect your bringin' home Phœbe," the old woman answered with great animation, "I rek'lect your bringin' Phœbe home to take a cup o' tea, or a little snack o' supper, a mort o' times."

"Bother Phœbe," cried Mr. Marks, "who's a talkin' of Phœbe? what's Phœbe that anybody should go to put themselves out about her? Do you remember my bringin' home a gentleman arter ten o'clock one September night; a gentleman as was wet through to the skin, and was covered with mud and slush, and green slime and black muck, from the crown of his head to the sole of his foot, and had his arm broke, and his shoulder swelled up awful; and was such a object that nobody would ha' knowed him. A gentleman as had to have his clothes cut off him in some places, and as



sat by the kitchen fire, starin' at the coals as if he'd gone mad or stupid-like, and didn't know where he was, or who he was: and as had to be cared for like a baby, and dressed and dried, and washed, and fed with spoonfuls of brandy that had to be forced between his locked teeth, before any life could be got into him. Do you remember that, mother?"

The old woman nodded, and muttered something, to the effect that she remembered all these circumstances most vividly, now that Luke happened to mention them.

Robert Audley uttered a wild cry, and fell down upon his knees by the side of the sick man's bed.

"My God!" he ejaculated, "I thank Thee for Thy wondrous mercies. George Talboys is alive!"

"Wait a bit," said Mr. Marks, "don't you be too fast. Mother, give us down that tinbox on the shelf over against the chest of drawers, will you?"

The old woman obeyed, and after fumbling amongst broken tea-cups and milk-jugs, lidless wooden cotton-boxes, and a miscellaneous litter of rags and crockery, produced a tin snuff-box with a sliding lid; a shabby, dirty looking box enough.

Robert Audley still knelt by the bed-side with his face hidden by his clasped hands. Luke Marks opened the tin box.

"There ain't no money in it, more's the pity," he said, "or if there had been it wouldn't have been let stop very long. But there's summat in it that perhaps you'll think quite as vallible as money, and that's



what I'm goin' to give you as a proof that a drunken brute can feel thankful to them as is kind to him."

He took out two folded papers, which he gave into Robert Audley's hands.

They were two leaves torn out of a pocket-book, and they were written upon in pencil, and in a handwriting that was quite strange to Mr. Audley. A cramped, stiff and yet scrawling hand, such as some ploughman might have written.

"I don't know this writing," Robert said, as he eagerly unfolded the first of the two papers, "What has this to do with my friend? Why do you show me these?"

"Suppose you read 'em first," said Mr. Marks, "and ask me questions about 'em afterwards."

The first paper which Robert Audley had unfolded contained the following lines, written in that cramped, yet scrawling hand which was so strange to him.

"My dear friend, — I write to you in such utter confusion of mind as perhaps no man ever before suffered. I cannot tell you what has happened to me, I can only tell you that something has happened which will drive me from England, a broken-hearted man, to seek some corner of the earth in which I may live and die unknown and forgotten. I can only ask you to forget me. If your friendship could have done me any good, I would have appealed to it. If your counsel could have been of any help to me, I would have confided in you. But neither friendship nor counsel can help me; and all I can say to you is this, God bless



you for the past, and teach you to forget me, in the future. G. T."

The second paper was addressed to another person, and its contents were briefer than those of the first.

"Helen, — May God pity and forgive you for that which you have done to-day, as truly as I do. Rest in peace. You shall never hear of me again; to you and to the world, I shall henceforth be that which you wished me to be to-day. You need fear no molestation from me; I leave England, never to return.

"G. T."

Robert Audley sat staring at these lines in hopeless bewilderment. They were not in his friend's familiar hand; and yet they purported to be written by him, and were signed with his initials.

He looked scrutinisingly at the face of Luke Marks, thinking that perhaps some trick was being played upon him.

"This was not written by George Talboys," he said.

"It was," answered Luke Marks, "it was written by Mr. Talboys, every line of it; he wrote it with his own hand; but it was his left hand, for he couldn't use his right because of his broken arm."

Robert Audley looked up suddenly, and the shadow of suspicion passed away from his face.

"I understand," he said, "I understand. Tell me all; tell me how it was that my poor friend was saved."



He could scarcely realise to himself yet that what he had heard could be true. He could scarcely believe that this friend whom he had so bitterly regretted might still clasp him by the hand in a happy future, when the darkness of the past should have cleared away. He was dazed and bewildered at first, and not able to understand this new hope which had dawned so suddenly upon him.

"Tell me all," he cried, "for mercy's sake tell me everything, and let me try to understand it if I can."

"I was at work up at Atkinson's farm last September," said Luke Marks, "helpin' to stack the last o' the corn, and as the nighest way from the farm to mother's cottage was through the meadows at the back o' the Court, I used to come that way; and Phœbe used to stand at the gate in the garden wall beyond the lime-walk, sometimes, to have a chat with me, knowin' my time o' comin' home. Sometimes she wouldn't be there, and sometimes I've leapt the dry moat as parts the kitchen gardens from the meadows alongside of 'em, and have dropped in at the servants' hall to have a glass of ale or a bit o' supper, as it might be.

"I don't know what Phœbe was a doin' upon the evenin' of the seventh o' September — I rek'lect the date because Farmer Atkinson paid me my wages all of a lump on that day, and I'd had to sign a bit of a receipt for the money he give me — I don't know what she was a doin', but she warn't at the gate



agen the lime-walk, so I went round to the other side o' the gardens and jumped across the dry ditch; for I wanted partic'ler to see her that night, as I was goin' away to work upon a farm beyond Chelmsford the next day. Audley church clock struck nine as I was crossin' the meadows between Atkinson's and the Court, and it must have been about a quarter past nine when I got into the kitchen garden.

"I crossed the garden, and went into the limewalk; the nighest way to the servants' hall took me through the shrubbery and past the dry well. It was a dark night, but I knew my way well enough about the old place, and the light in the window of the servants' hall looked red and comfortable through the darkness. I was close against the mouth of the dry well when I heard a sound that made my blood creep. It was a groan; a groan of a man in pain, as was lyin' somewhere hid among the bushes. I warn't afraid of ghosts, and I warn't afraid of anythink in a general way, but there was somethin' in hearin' this groan as chilled me to the very heart, and for a minute I was struck all of a heap and didn't know what to do. But I heard the groan again, and then I began to search amongst the bushes. I found a man lyin' hidden under a lot o' laurels, and I thought at first he was up to no good, and I was a goin' to collar him and take him to the house, when he caught me by the wrist without gettin' up from the ground, but lookin' at me very earnest, as I could see by the way his face was turned towards me in the darkness, and asked me who



I was, and what I was, and what I had to do with the folks at the Court.

"There was somethin' in the way he spoke that told me he was a gentleman, though I didn't know him from Adam, and couldn't see his face; and I answered his questions civil.

"I want to get away from this place,' he said, 'without bein' seen by any livin' creetur, remember that. I've been lyin' here ever since four o'clock to-day, and I'm half dead, but I want to get away without bein' seen, mind that.'

"I told him that was easy enough, but I began to think my first thoughts of him might have been right enough after all, and that he couldn't have been up to no good to want to sneak away so precious quiet.

"Can you take me to any place where I can get a change of dry clothes,' he says, 'without half a dozen people knowin' it.'

"He'd got up into a sittin' attitude by this time, and I could see that his right arm hung loose by his side, and that he was in pain.

"I pointed to his arm, and asked him what was the matter with it; but he only answered very quiet like, 'Broken, my lad, broken. Not that that's much,' he says in another tone, speaking to himself like more, than to me. 'There's broken hearts as well as broken limbs, and they're not so easy mended.'

"I told him I could take him to mother's cottage, and that he could dry his clothes there and welcome.

"Can your mother keep a secret?' he asked.



“‘Well she could keep one well enough, if she could remember it,’ I told him; ‘but you might tell her the secrets of all the Freemasons, and Foresters, and Buffalers, and Oddfellers as ever was, to-night; and she’d have forgotten all about ’em to-morrow mornin’.’

“He seemed satisfied with this, and he got himself up by holdin’ on to me, for it seemed as if his limbs was so cramped, the use of ’em was almost gone. I felt as he came agen me, that his clothes was wet and mucky.

“‘You haven’t been and fell into the fish-pond, have you, sir?’ I asked.

“He made no answer to my question; he didn’t seem even to have heard it. I could see now he was standin’ upon his feet that he was a tall, fine made man, a head and shoulders higher than me.

“‘Take me to your mother’s cottage,’ he said, ‘and get me some dry clothes if you can; I’ll pay you well for your trouble.’

“I knew that the key was mostly left in the wooden gate in the garden wall, so I led him that way. He could scarcely walk at first, and it was only by leanin’ heavily upon my shoulder that he managed to get along. I got him through the gate, leavin’ it unlocked behind me, and trustin’ to the chance of that not bein’ noticed by the undergardener, who had the care of the key, and was a careless chap enough. I took him across the meadows, and brought him up here, still keepin’ away from the village, and in the fields, where there wasn’t a creature to see us at that time o’ night;



and so I got him into the room down-stairs, where mother was a sittin' over the fire gettin' my bit o' supper ready for me.

"I put the strange chap in a chair agen the fire, and then for the first time I had a good look at him. I never see anybody in such a state before. He was all over green damp and muck, and his hands was scratched and cut to pieces. I got his clothes off him how I could, for he was like a child in my hands, and sat starin' at the fire as helpless as any baby; only givin' a long heavy sigh now and then, as if his heart was a goin' to bust. He didn't seem to know where he was; he didn't seem to hear us nor to see us; he only sat starin' straight before him, with his poor broken arm hanging loose by his side.

"Thinkin' he was in a very bad way, I wanted to go and fetch Mr. Dawson to him, and I said somethin' about it to mother. But queer as he seemed in his mind, he looked up quickly, as sharp as possible, and said No, No; nobody was to know of his bein' there except us two.

"I asked if I should run and fetch a drop of brandy; and he said, yes, I might do that. It was close upon eleven o'clock when I went into the public-house, and it was strikin' eleven as I got back home.

"It was a good thing I'd fetched the brandy, for he was shiverin' awful, and the edge of the mug rattled against his teeth. I had to force the spirit between 'em, they were so tight locked, before he could drink it. At last he dropped into a kind of a dose, a stupid



sort of sleep, and began to nod over the fire, so I ran and got a blanket and wrapped him in it, and got him to lie down upon the press bedstead in the room under this. I sent mother to bed, and I sat by the fire and watched him, and kep' the fire up till it was just upon daybreak, when he 'woke up all of a sudden with a start, and said he must go, directly minute.

"I begged him not to think of such a thing, and told him he warn't fit to move for ever so long; but he said he must go, and he got up, and though he staggered like, and at first could hardly stand steady two minutes together, he wouldn't be beat, and he got me to dress him in his clothes as I'd dried and cleaned as well as I could while he laid asleep. I did manage it at last, but the clothes was awful spoiled, and he looked a dreadful object, with his pale face and a great cut on his forehead that I'd washed and tied up with a handkercher. He could only get his coat on by buttoning on it round his neck, for he couldn't put a sleeve upon bis broken arm. But he held out agen everything, though he groaned every now and then; and what with the scratches and bruises on his hands, and the cut upon his forehead and his stiff limbs and his broken arm he'd plenty of call to groan; and by the time it was broad daylight he was dressed and ready to go.

"What's the nearest town to this upon the London road?" he asked me.

"I told him as the nighest town was Brentwood.

"Very well then," he says, "if you'll go with me



to Brentwood, and take me to some surgeon as 'll set my arm, I'll give you a five pound note for that and all your other trouble.'

"I told him that I was ready and willin' to do anything as he wanted done; and asked him if I shouldn't go and see if I could borrow a cart from some of the neighbours to drive him over in, for I told him it was a good six miles' walk.

"He shook his head, No, no, no, he said, he didn't want anybody to know anything about him; he'd rather walk it.

"He did walk it; and he walked it like a good un too; though I know as every step he took o' them six mile he took in pain; but he held out as he'd held out before; I never see such a chap to hold out in all my blessed life. He had to stop sometimes and lean agen a gateway to get his breath; but he held out still, till at last we got into Brentwood, and then he says 'Take me to the nighest surgeon's', and I took him, and I waited while he had his arm set in splints, which took a precious long time. The surgeon wanted him to stay in Brentwood till he was better, but he said it warn't to be heard on, he must get up to London without a minute's loss of time; so the surgeon made him as comfortable as he could, considerin', and tied up his arm in a sling."

Robert Audley started. A circumstance connected with his visit to Liverpool flashed suddenly back upon his memory. He remembered the clerk who had called him back to say that there was a passenger who took



his berth on board the *Victoria Regia* within an hour or so of the vessel's sailing; a young man with his arm in a sling, who had called himself by some common name, which Robert had forgotten.

"When his arm was dressed," continued Luke, "he says to the surgeon, can you give me a pencil to write something before I go away. The surgeon smiles and shakes his head, 'You'll never be able to write with that there hand to-day,' he says, pointin' to the arm as had just been dressed. 'P'raps not,' the young chap answers quiet enough, 'but I can write with the other.' 'Can't *I* write it for you?' says the surgeon. 'No thank you,' answers the other, 'what I've got to write is private. If you can give me a couple of envelopes I'll be obliged to you.'

"With that the surgeon goes to fetch the envelopes, and the young chap takes a pocket-book out of his coat pocket with his left hand; the cover was wet and dirty, but the inside was clean enough, and he tears out a couple of leaves and begins to write upon 'em as you see; and he writes dreadful awk'ard with his left hand, and he writes slow, but he contrives to finish what you see, and then he puts the two bits o' writin' into the envelopes as the surgeon brings him, and he seals 'em up, and he puts a pencil cross upon one of 'em, and nothin' on the other; and then he pays the surgeon for his trouble; and the surgeon says, ain't there nothin' more he can do for him, and can't he persuade him to stay in Brentwood till his arm's better; but he says no, no, it ain't possible; and then he says



to me, 'Come along o' me to the railway-station and I'll give you what I've promised.'

"So I went to the station with him. We was in time to catch the train as stops at Brentwood at half-after eight, and we had five minutes to spare. So he takes me into a corner of the platform, and he says: 'I wants you to deliver these here letters for me,' which I told him I was willin'. 'Very well then,' he says, 'look here, you know Audley Court?' 'Yes,' I says, 'I ought to, for my sweetheart lives lady's-maid there.' 'Whose lady's-maid?' he says. So I tells him 'My lady's, the new lady what was governess at Mr. Dawson's.' 'Very well, then,' he says, 'this here letter with the cross upon the envelope is for Lady Audley, but you're to be sure to give it into her own hands; and remember to take care as nobody sees you give it. I promises to do this, and he hands me the first letter. And then he says, "Do you know Mr. Audley, as is nevy to Sir Michael?" and I said, 'Yes, I've heerd tell on him, and I'd heerd as he was a reg'lar swell, but affable and free spoken' (for I had heerd tell on you, you know)," Luke added parenthetically. "'Now look here," the young chap says, 'You're to give this other letter to Mr. Robert Audley, whose a stayin' at the Sun Inn, in the village;' and I tells him it's all right, as I've know'd the Sun ever since I was a baby. So then he gives me the second letter, what's got nothink wrote upon the envelope, and he gives me a five-pound note, accordin' to promise; and then he says 'Good day, and thank you for all your trouble,' and he gets



into a second-class carriage, and the last I sees of him is a face as white as a sheet of writin' paper, and a great patch of stickin' plaster criss-crossed upon his forehead."

"Poor George! poor George!"

"I went back to Audley, and I went straight to the Sun Inn, and asked for you, meanin' to deliver both letters faithful, so help me God, then; but the landlord told me as you'd started off that mornin' for London, and he didn't know when you'd come back, and he didn't know the name o' the place where you lived in London, though he said he thought it was in one o' them Law Courts, such as Westminster Hall or Doctors' Commons, or somethin' like that. So what was I to do? I couldn't send the letter by post, not knowin' where to direct to, and I couldn't give it into your own hands, and I'd been told partikler not to let anybody else know of it; so I'd nothin' to do but to wait and see if you come back, and bide my time for givin' of it to you.

"I thought I'd go over to the Court in the evenin' and see Phœbe, and find out from her when there'd be a chance of my seein' her lady, for I know'd she could manage it if she liked. So I didn't go to work that day, though I ought to ha' done, and I lounged and idled about until it was nigh upon dusk, and then I goes down to the meadows behind the Court, and there I finds Phœbe sure enough waitin' agen the wooden door in the wall, on the look-out for me.

"Well I went into the shrubbery with her, and



I was a turnin' towards to the old well, for we'd been in the habit of sittin' upon the brickwork about it often of a summer's evening, but Phoebe comes over as pale as a ghost all of a sudden, and says, 'Not there! not there!' So I asks, 'Why not there?' and she answers 'as she don't know, but she feels nervous like this evenin', and she's heerd as the well's haunted. I tells her as that's all a pack o'gammon, but she says, whether it is, or whether it isn't, she won't go agen the well. So we goes back to the gate, and she leans upon it talkin' to me.

"I hadn't been talkin' to her long before I see there was somethink wrong with her, and I told her as much.

"Well,' she says, 'I ain't quite myself this evenin', for I had a upset, yesterday, and I ain't got over it yet.'

"A upset,' I says. 'You had a quarrel with your missus, I suppose.'

"She didn't answer me directly, but she smiled the queerest smile as ever I see, and presently she says,

"No, Luke, it weren't nothin' o' that kind; and what's more, nobody could be friendlier towards me than my lady; I think she'd do anythink for me a'most, and I think whether it was a bit o' farming stock and furniture or such like, or whether it was the goodwill of a public-house, she wouldn't refuse me anythink as I asked her.'

"I couldn't make out this, for it was only a few



days before, as she'd told me her missus was selfish and extravagant, and we might wait a long time before we could get what we wanted from her.

"So I says to her, 'Why, this is rather sudden like, Phœbe,' and she says, 'Yes, it is sudden;' and she smiles again, just the same sort of smile as before. Upon that I turns round upon her sharp, and says,

"'I'll tell you what it is, my gal, you're a keepin' somethink from me; somethink you've been told, or somethink you've found out; and if you think you're a goin' to try that game on with me, you'll find you're very much mistaken; and so I give you warnin.'

"But she laughed it off like, and says, 'Lor, Luke, what could have put such fancies into your head?'

"I says, 'If I've got fancies in my head it's you that have put 'em there; and I tell you once more I won't stand no nonsense, and if you want to keep secrets from the man as you're a goin' to marry, you'd better marry somebody else and keep secrets from him, for you won't do it from me, and so I tell you.'

"Upon which she begins to whimper a bit, but I takes no notice o' that, but begins to question her about my lady. I had the letter marked with the pencil cross in my pocket, and I wanted to find out how I was to deliver it.

"'Perhaps other people can keep secrets as well as you,' I said, 'and perhaps other people can make friends as well as you. There were a gentleman came here to see your missus yesterday, warn't there; a tall young gentleman with a brown beard?'



"Instead of answering of me like a Christian, my cousin Phœbe bursts out a cryin', and wrings her hands and goes on awful, until I'm dashed if I can make out what she's up to.

"But little by little I got it out of her, for I wouldn't stand no nonsense; and she told me how she'd been sittin' at work at the window of her little room, which was at the top of the house, right up in one of the gables, and overlooked the lime-walk and the shrubbery and the well, when she see my lady walkin' with a strange gentleman, and they walked together for a long time, until by-and-by they —"

"Stop," cried Robert Audley, "I know the rest."

"Well Phœbe told me all about what she see, and she told me as she'd met her lady almost directly afterwards, and somethin' had passed between 'em, not much, but enough to let her missus know that the servant what she looked down upon had found out that as would put her in that servant's power to the last day of her life.

"'And she is in my power, Luke,' says Phœbe, 'and she'll do anythin' in the world for us if we keep her secret.'

"So you see both my Lady Audley and her maid thought as the gentleman as I'd seen safe off by the London train was lyin' dead at the bottom of the well. If I was to give the letter they'd find out the contrary of this, and if I was to give the letter, Phœbe and me would lose the chance of gettin' started in life by her missus.



"So I kep' the letter and kep' my secret, and my lady kep' hern. But I thought if she acted liberal by me, and gave me the money I wanted, free like, I'd tell her everythink and make her mind easy.

"But she didn't. Whatever she give me she throwed me as if I'd been a dog. Whenever she spoke to me, she spoke as she might have spoken to a dog; and a dog she couldn't abide the sight on. There was no word in her mouth that was too bad for me. There was no toss as she could give her head that was too proud and scornful for me; and my blood biled agen her, and I kep' my secret, and let her keep hern. I opened the two letters and I read 'em, but I couldn't make much sense out of 'em, and I hid 'em away; and not a creature but me has see 'em until this night."

Luke Marks had finished his story, and lay quietly enough, exhausted by having talked so long. He watched Robert Audley's face, fully expecting some reproof, some grave lecture; for he had a vague consciousness that he had done wrong.

But Robert did not lecture him; he had no fancy for an office which he did not think himself fitted to perform.

"The clergyman will talk to him and comfort him when he comes to-morrow morning," Mr. Audley thought; "and if the poor creature needs a sermon it will come better from his lips than from mine. What should I say to him? His sin has recoiled upon his own head; for had my lady's mind been set at ease, the Castle Inn would not have been burned down.



Who shall dare to try and order his own life after this? who can fail to recognise God's hand in this strange story?"

He thought very humbly of the deductions he had made and acted upon. He remembered how implicitly he had trusted in the pitiful light of his own reason; but he was comforted by remembering also that he had tried simply and honestly to do his duty; faithfully alike to the dead and to the living.

Robert Audley sat until long after daybreak with the sick man, who fell into a heavy slumber a short time after he had finished his story. The old woman had dozed comfortably throughout her son's confession. Phoebe was asleep upon the press bedstead in the room below; so the young barrister was the only watcher.

He could not sleep; he could only think of the story he had heard. He could only thank God for his friend's preservation, and pray that he might be able to go to Clara Talboys, and say, "Your brother still lives, and has been found."

Phoebe came up-stairs at eight o'clock, ready to take her place at the sick bed, and Robert Audley went away to get a bed at the Sun Inn. He had had no more comfortable rest than such odd snatches of sleep as are to be got in railway carriages and on board steamers, during the last three nights, and he was completely worn out. It was nearly dusk when he awoke out of a long dreamless slumber, and dressed himself before dining in the little sitting-room, in which



he and George had sat together a few months before.

The landlord waited upon him at dinner, and told him that Luke Marks had died at five o'clock that afternoon. "He went off rather sudden like," the man said, "but very quiet."

Robert Audley wrote a long letter that evening, addressed to Madame Taylor, care of Monsieur Val, Villebrumeuse; a long letter in which he told the wretched woman who had borne so many names and was to bear a false one for the rest of her life, the story that the dying man had told him.

"It may be some comfort to her to hear that her husband did not perish in his youth by her wicked hand," he thought, "if her selfish soul can hold any sentiment of pity or sorrow for others."

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## CHAPTER XV.

Restored.

MR. TALBOYS returned to Dorsetshire to tell her that his only son had sailed for Australia upon the 1st of September, and that it was most probable he would return to claim the forgiveness of his father he had never very particularly injured; except in the matter of having made that terrible matrimonial mistake which had exercised so fatal an influence upon his youth.

Mr. Harcourt Talboys was fairly nonplussed. Junius Brutus had never been placed in such a position as this, and seeing no way of getting out of this dilemma, by acting after his favourite model, Mr. Talboys was fain to be natural for once in his life, and to confess that he had suffered much uneasiness and pain of mind about his only son, since his conversation with Robert Audley; and that he would be heartily glad to take his poor boy to his arms, whenever he should return to England. But when was he likely to return? and how was he to be communicated with? That was the question. Robert Audley remembered the advertisements which he had caused to be inserted in the Melbourne and Sydney papers. If George had re-entered either city alive, how was it that no notice had ever been taken of that advertisement? Was it



likely his friend would be indifferent to his uneasiness? But then, again, it was just possible that George Talboys had not happened to see this advertisement; and, as he had travelled under a feigned name, neither his fellow-passengers nor the captain of the vessel would have been able to identify him with the person advertised for. What was to be done? Must the patiently till George grew weary of his exile, and returned to the friends who loved him; or were there any means to be taken by which his return might be hastened? Robert Audley was at fault! Perhaps to the unspeakable relief of mind which he had experienced upon the discovery of his friend's escape, he was unable to look beyond the one fact of that providential preservation.

In this state of mind he went down to Dorsetshire to pay a visit to Mr. Talboys, who had given way to a perfect torrent of generous impulses, and had gone so far as to invite his son's friend to share the prim hospitality of the square, red-brick mansion.

Mr. Talboys had only two sentiments upon the subject of George's story; one was a natural relief and happiness in the thought that his son had been saved; the other was an earnest wish that my lady had been *his* wife, and that he might thus have had the pleasure of making a signal example of her.

"It is not for me to blame you, Mr. Audley," he said, "for having smuggled this guilty woman out of the reach of justice, and thus, as I may say, paltered with the laws of your country; I can only remark



that, had the lady fallen into *my* hands, she would have been very differently treated."

It was in the middle of April when Robert Audley found himself once more under those black fir-trees beneath which his wandering thoughts had so often strayed since his first meeting with Clara Talboys. There were primroses and early violets in the hedges now, and the streams, which, upon his first visit, had been hard and frost-bound as the heart of Harcourt Talboys, had thawed, like that gentleman, and ran merrily under the black thorn bushes in the capricious April sunshine.

Robert had a prim bed-room, and an uncompromising dressing-room allotted to him in the square house, and he woke every morning upon a metallic spring-mattress which always gave him the idea of sleeping upon some musical instrument, to see the sun glaring in upon him through the square white blinds, and lighting up the two lacquered urns which adorned the foot of his blue iron bedstead, until they blazed like two tiny brazen lamps of the Roman period.

A visit to Mr. Harcourt Talboys was perhaps rather more like a return to boyhood and boarding-school than is quite consonant with the Sybarite view of human enjoyment. There were the same curtainless windows, and narrow strips of bedside carpet; the same clanging bell in the early morning; the same uncompromising servants filing into a long dining-room to assist at perhaps the same prayers; and there was altogether rather too much of the "private academy



for the sons of gentlemen preparing for the church and the army," in the Talboys establishment.

But if the square-built, red-brick mansion had been the palace of Armida, and the prim, linen-jacketed man represented by a legion of houris, Robert Audley could have scarcely seemed better satisfied with his entertainment.

He awoke to the sound of the clanging bell, and made his toilet in the cruel early morning sunshine, which is bright without being cheerful, and makes you wink without making you warm. He emulated Mr. Harcourt Talboys in the matter of shower-baths and cold water, and emerged prim and blue as that gentleman himself, as the clock in the hall struck seven, to join the master of the house in his ante-breakfast constitutional under the fir-trees in the stiff plantation.

But there was generally a third person who assisted in these constitutional promenades, and that third person was Clara Talboys, who used to walk by her father's side, more beautiful than the morning, — for that was sometimes dull and cloudy, while she was always fresh and bright, — in a broad-leaved straw hat and flapping blue ribbons, one quarter of an inch of which Mr. Audley would have esteemed a prouder decoration than ever adorned a favoured creature's button-hole.

Absent George was often talked of in these morning walks, and Robert Audley seldom took his place at the long breakfast table without remembering the morning upon which he had first sat in that room,



telling his friend's story, and hating Clara Talboys for her cold self-possession. He knew her better now, and knew that she was one of the most noble and beautiful of women. But had she yet discovered how dear she was to her brother's friend? Robert used to wonder sometimes if it were possible that he had not yet betrayed himself; if it could be possible that the love which made her very presence a magical influence to him, had failed to make itself known by some inadvertent glance, by some unconscious tremble in the voice, that seemed to take another tone when he addressed her.

The dull life in the square-built house was only relieved now and then by a stiff dinner party, at which a few country people assembled to bore each other by mutual consent; and by occasional inroads of morning callers, who took the drawing-room by storm, and held it for about an hour, to the utter discomfiture of Mr. Audley. That gentleman nourished sentiments of peculiar malevolence upon the subject of the fresh-coloured young country squires, who generally appeared with their mammas and sisters upon these occasions.

It was impossible, of course, that these young men could come within the radius of Clara's brown eyes without falling wildly in love with her; and it was impossible, therefore, that Robert Audley could do otherwise than furiously hate them as impertinent rivals and interlopers. He was jealous of anybody and everybody who came into the region inhabited by those calm brown eyes; jealous of a fat widower of



eight-and-forty; of an elderly baronet with purple whiskers; of the old women about the neighbourhood whom Clara Talboys visited and ministered to; of the flowers in the conservatory, which occupied so much of her time and distracted her attention from him.

At first they were very ceremonious towards each other, and were only familiar and friendly upon the one subject of George's adventures; but, little by little, a pleasant intimacy arose between them, and before the first three weeks of Robert's visit had elapsed, Miss Talboys made him happy, by taking him seriously in hand and lecturing him on the purposeless life he had led so long, and the little use he had made of the talents and opportunities that had been given to him.

How pleasant it was to be lectured by the woman he loved! How pleasant it was to humiliate himself and depreciate himself before her! How delightful it was to get such splendid opportunities of hinting that if his life had been sanctified by an object, he might indeed have striven to be something better than an idle *flaneur* upon the smooth pathways that have no particular goal; that, blessed by the ties which would have given a solemn purpose to every hour of his existence, he might indeed have fought the battle earnestly and unflinchingly. He generally wound up with a gloomy insinuation to the effect that it was only likely he would drop quietly over the edge of the Temple Gardens some afternoon, when the river



was bright and placid in the low sunlight, and the little children had gone home to their tea.

"Do you think I can read French novels and smoke mild Turkish until I am three-score-and-ten, Miss Talboys?" he asked. "Do you think that there will not come a day in which my meerschaums will be foul, and the French novels more than usually stupid, and life altogether such a dismal monotony that I shall want to get rid of it somehow or other?"

I am sorry to say that while this hypocritical young barrister was holding forth in this despondent way, he had mentally sold up his bachelor possessions, including all Michel Levy's publications and half a dozen solid silver-mounted meerschaums, pensioned off Mrs. Malony, and laid out two or three thousand pounds in the purchase of a few acres of verdant shrubbery and sloping lawn, embosomed amid which there should be a fairy cottage *ornée*, whose rustic casements should glimmer out of bowers of myrtle and clematis to see themselves reflected in the purple bosom of a lake.

Of course Clara Talboys was far from discovering the drift of these melancholy lamentations. She recommended Mr. Audley to read hard and think seriously of his profession, and begin life in real earnest. It was a hard, dry sort of existence perhaps which she recommended; a life of serious work and application, in which he should strive to be useful to his fellow-creatures, and win a reputation for himself. Mr.



Audley almost made a wry face at the thought of such a barren prospect.

"I'd do all that," he thought, "and do it earnestly, if I could be sure of a reward for my labour. If she would accept my reputation when it was won, and support me in the struggle by her beloved companionship. But what if she sends me away to fight the battle, and marries some hulking country squire while my back is turned?"

Being naturally of a vacillating and dilatory disposition, there is no saying how long Mr. Audley might have kept his secret, fearful to speak and break the charm of that uncertainty which, though not always hopeful, was very seldom quite despairing, had not he been hurried by the impulse of an unguarded moment into a full confession of the truth.

He had stayed five weeks at Grange Heath, and felt that he could not, in common decency, stay any longer; so he had packed his portmanteau one pleasant May morning, and had announced his departure.

Mr. Talboys was not the sort of man to utter any passionate lamentations at the prospect of losing his guest, but he expressed himself with a cool cordiality which served with him as the strongest demonstration of friendship.

"We have got on very well together, Mr. Audley," he said, "and you have been pleased to appear sufficiently happy in the quiet routine of our orderly household; nay, more, you have conformed to our little domestic regulations in a manner which I cannot



refrain from saying I take as an especial compliment to myself."

Robert bowed. How thankful he was to the good fortune which had never suffered him to oversleep the signal of the clanging bell, or led him away beyond the ken of clocks at Mr. Talboys's luncheon hour.

"I trust as we have got on so remarkably well together," Mr. Talboys resumed, "you will do me the honour of repeating your visit to Dorsetshire whenever you feel inclined. You will find plenty of sport amongst my farms, and you will meet with every politeness and attention from my tenants, if you like to bring your gun with you."

Robert responded most heartily to these friendly overtures. He declared that there was no earthly occupation that was more agreeable to him than partridge shooting, and that he should be only too delighted to avail himself of the privileges so kindly offered to him. He could not help glancing towards Clara as he said this. The perfect lids drooped a little over the brown eyes, and the faintest shadow of a blush illuminated the beautiful face.

But this was the young barrister's last day in Elysium, and there must be a dreary interval of days and nights and weeks and months before the first of September would give him an excuse for returning to Dorsetshire. A dreary interval which fresh-coloured young squires, or fat widowers of eight-and-forty might use to his disadvantage. It was no wonder, therefore, that he contemplated this dismal prospect with moody



despair, and was bad company for Miss Talboys that morning.

But in the evening after dinner, when the sun was low in the west, and Harcourt Talboys closeted in his library upon some judicial business with his lawyer and a tenant farmer, Mr. Audley grew a little more agreeable. He stood by Clara's side in one of the long windows of the drawing-room watching the shadows deepening in the sky and the rosy light growing every moment rosier as the day died out. He could not help enjoying that quiet *tête-à-tête*, though the shadow of the next morning's express which was to carry him away to London loomed darkly across the pathway of his joy. He could not help being happy in her presence; forgetful of the past, reckless of the future.

They talked of the one subject which was always a bond of union between them. They talked of her lost brother George. She spoke of him in a very melancholy tone this evening. How could she be otherwise than sad, remembering that if he lived — and she was not even sure of that — he was a lonely wanderer far away from all who loved him, and carrying the memory of a blighted life wherever he went. In the sombre twilight stillness she spoke of him thus, with her hands clasped and the tears trembling in her eyes.

“I cannot think how papa can be so resigned to my poor brother's absence,” she said, “for he does love him, Mr. Audley; even you must have seen lately



that he does love him. But I cannot think how he can so quietly submit to his absence. If I were a man, I would go to Australia, and find him, and bring him back; if he was still to be found among the living," she added in a lower voice.

She turned her face away from Robert, and looked out at the darkening sky. He laid his hand upon her arm. It trembled in spite of him, and his voice trembled, too, as he spoke to her.

"Shall *I* go to look for your brother?" he said.

"*You!*" She turned her head, and looked at him earnestly through her tears. "You, Mr. Audley! Do you think that I could ask you to make such a sacrifice for me, or for those I love?"

"And do you think, Clara, that I should think any sacrifice too great an one if it were made for you? Do you think there is any voyage I would refuse to take, if I knew that you would welcome me when I came home, and thank me for having served you faithfully. I will go from one end of the Continent of Australia to the other to look for your brother, if you please, Clara; and will never return alive unless I bring him with me, and will take my chance of what reward you shall give me for my labour."

Her head was bent, and it was some moments before she answered him.

"You are very good and generous, Mr. Audley," she said, at last, "and I feel this offer too much to be able to thank you for it. But — what you speak of



could never be. By what right could I accept such a sacrifice."

"By the right which makes me your bounden slave for ever and ever, whether you will or no. By the right of the love I bear you, Clara," cried Mr. Audley, dropping on his knees, — rather awkwardly, it must be confessed — and covering a soft little hand, that he had found half-hidden among the folds of a silken dress, with passionate kisses.

"I love you, Clara," he said, "I love you. You may call for your father, and have me turned out of the house this moment, if you like; but I shall go on loving you all the same; and I shall love you for ever and ever, whether you will or no."

The little hand was drawn away from his, but not with a sudden or angry gesture, and it rested for one moment lightly and tremulously upon his dark hair.

"Clara, Clara!" he murmured, in a low pleading voice, "shall I go to Australia to look for your brother?"

There was no answer. I don't know how it is, but there is scarcely anything more delicious than silence in such cases. Every moment of hesitation is a tacit avowal; every pause is a tender confession.

"Shall we both go, dearest? Shall we go as man and wife? Shall we go together, my dear love, and bring our brother back between us?"

Mr. Harcourt Talboys coming into the lamp-lit



room a quarter of an hour afterwards, found Robert Audley alone, and had to listen to a revelation which very much surprised him. Like all self-sufficient people, he was tolerably blind to everything that happened under his nose, and he had fully believed that his own society, and the Spartan regularity of his household, had been the attractions which had made Dorsetshire delightful to his guest.

He was rather disappointed, therefore; but he bore his disappointment pretty well, and expressed a placid and rather stoical satisfaction at the turn which affairs had taken.

"I have only one more point upon which I wish to obtain your consent, my dear sir," Robert said, when almost everything had been pleasantly settled. "Our honeymoon trip, with your permission, will be to Australia."

Mr. Talboys was taken aback by this. He brushed something like a tearful mist away from his hard grey eyes as he offered Robert his hand.

"You are going to look for my son," he said. "Bring me back my boy, and I will freely forgive you for having robbed me of my daughter."

So Robert Audley went back to London, to surrender his chambers in Fig-tree Court, and to make all due inquiries about such ships as sailed from Liverpool for Sydney in the month of June.

He went back a new man, with new hopes, new cares, new prospects, new purposes; with a life that



was so entirely changed that he looked out upon a world in which everything wore a radiant and rosy aspect, and wondered how it could ever have seemed such a dull, neutral tinted universe.

He had lingered until after luncheon at Grange Heath, and it was in the dusky twilight that he entered the shady Temple courts and found his way to his chambers. He found Mrs. Malony scrubbing the stairs, as was her wont upon a Saturday evening, and he had to make his way upward amidst an atmosphere of soapy steam, that made the bannisters greasy under his touch.

"There's lots of letthers, yer honour," the laundress said, as she rose from her knees and flattened herself against the wall to enable Robert to pass her, "and there's some parrcels, and there's a gentleman which has called ever so many times, and is waitin' to-night, for I towld him you'd written to me to say your rooms were to be aired."

"Very good, Mrs. M.; you may get me some dinner and a pint of sherry as soon as you like, and see that my luggage is all right if you please."

He walked quietly up to his room to see who his visitor was. He was not likely to be anybody of consequence. A dun, perhaps; for he had left his affairs in the wildest confusion when he ran off in answer to Mr. Talboys's invitation, and had been much too high up in the sublime Heaven of love, to remember any such sublunary matters as unsettled tailors' bills.

He opened the door of his sitting-room, and walked



in. The canaries were singing their farewell to the setting sun, and the faint, yellow light was flickering upon the geranium leaves. The visitor, whoever he was, sat with his back to the window and his head bent upon his breast. But he started up as Robert Audley entered the room, and the young man uttered a great cry of delight and surprise, and opened his arms to his lost friend, George Talboys.

Mrs. Malony had to fetch more wine and more dinner from the tavern which she honoured with her patronage, and the two young men sat deep into the night by the hearth which had so long been lonely.

We know how much Robert had to tell. He touched lightly and tenderly upon that subject which he knew was cruelly painful to his friend; he said very little of the wretched woman who was wearing out the remnant of her wicked life in the quiet suburb of the forgotten Belgian city.

George Talboys spoke very briefly of that sunny seventh of September, upon which he had left his friend sleeping by the trout stream while he went to accuse his false wife of that conspiracy which had well nigh broken his heart.

"God knows that from the moment in which I sank into the black pit, knowing the treacherous hand that had sent me to what might have been my death, my chief thought was of the safety of the woman who had betrayed me. I fell upon my feet upon a mass of slush and mire, but my shoulder was bruised, and my arm broken against the side of the well. I was



stunned and dazed for a few minutes, but I roused myself by an effort, for I felt that the atmosphere I breathed was deadly. I had my Australian experiences to help me in my peril, and I could climb like a cat. The stones of which the well was built were rugged and irregular, and I was able to work my way upwards by planting my feet in the interstices of the stones, and resting my back at times against the opposite side of the well, helping myself as well as I could with my hands, though one arm was crippled. It was hard work, Bob, and it seems strange enough that a man who had long professed himself weary of his life should take so much trouble to preserve it. I think I must have been working upwards of half an hour before I got to the top; I know the time seemed an eternity of pain and peril. It was impossible for me to leave the place until after dark without being observed, so I hid myself behind a clump of laurel bushes and laid down on the grass faint and exhausted to wait for nightfall. The man who found me there told you the rest, Robert."

"Yes, my poor old friend — yes, he told me all."

George had never returned to Australia after all. He had gone on board the *Victoria Regia*, but had afterwards exchanged his berth for one in another vessel belonging to the same owners, and had gone to New York, where he had stayed as long as he could support the weariness of his exile; as long as he could endure the loneliness of an existence which separated him from every friend he had ever known.



"Jonathan was very kind to me, Bob," he said; "I had enough money to enable me to get on pretty well in my own quiet way, and I meant to have started on the Californian gold-fields to get more when that was gone. I might have made plenty of friends had I pleased, but I carried the old bullet in my breast; and what sympathy could I have with men who knew nothing of my grief? I yearned for the strong grasp of your hand, Bob; the friendly touch of the hand which had guided me through the darkest passage of my life."









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Braddon, Mary Elizabeth

Lady Audley's secret

Bd.: 2

Leipzig 1862

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